MAR. 25c

Weird Tales

CLUTCHING HANDS OF DEATH

By HAROLD WARD

C. L. Moore
Robert E. Howard
Otis Adelbert Kline

MARCH, 1935
WEIRD TALES
Printed in U.S.A.
Vol. 25, No. 3—25c

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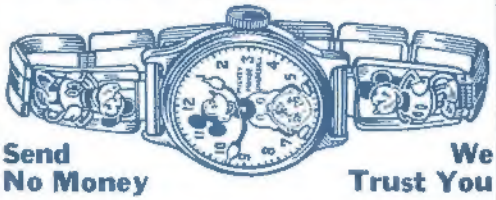

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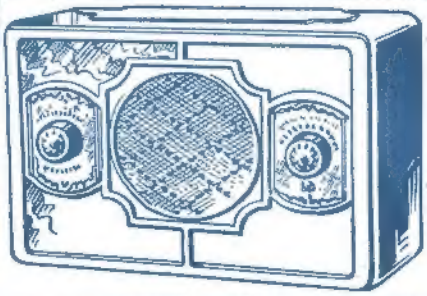

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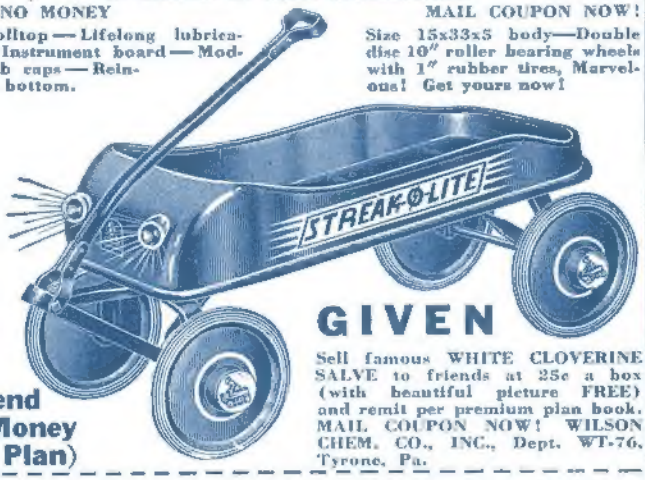

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Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, $3.00 a year in the United States, $4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeants' Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 9 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Tane sprang to his feet and lashed out with both fists."

Lord of the Lamia

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

A colorful weird mystery-tale of the eery adventures that befell an American archeologist in the eon-old city of Cairo.

"There is no country in the whole world that hath in it more marvelous things or greater works than hath the land of Egypt."

—Herodotus.

1. *Saint's Miracle*

JOHN TANE, archeologist and explorer, fanned his youthful sun-bronzed features with his pith helmet, and with the tip of his polished oxford prodded the sleeping bowab, or doorkeeper, on the stone bench beside the door. The latter blinked drowsily, adjusted his red tarbush, and got to his feet.

"Is this the house of Doctor Schneider?" asked the American.

The swarthy Egyptian doorkeeper an-

swered affirmatively, then inquired respectfully: "You are Tane Effendi?"

"I am." Tane glanced curiously up at the *mashrabiyeh* windows that jutted out over the narrow street, then back at the door on which he deciphered the Arabic inscription: "O God." And below this: "The Excellent Creator is the Everlasting."

"My master is expecting you, *effendi.*" The bowab swung the door open, and shouted to someone inside. "*Ya* Hasan. Tane Effendi comes." Then he stood respectfully aside, with a courteous: "*Bismillah!* Enter in the Name of Allah."

Stepping through the door, Tane found himself in a narrow passageway which turned first to the right, then to the left, before he reached the inner court, where a tall negro servant saluted him with the salam.

"My master awaits you in the reception room," he said, opening a second door.

Tane entered a large room that was pleasantly cool after the glaring heat of the city streets. In the center of the tiled floor a fountain of marble and onyx splashed musically. Beyond it, at the far end, was an alcove, the three walls of which were fronted with cushioned diwans. On the middle one of these sat a short, corpulent man, with a round, moonlike face, a bristling blond mustache, and weak, watery eyes which squinted through thick-lensed glasses. He was smoking a narghile, and his costume was entirely oriental from skull-cap to cordovan slippers, yet the cast of his features was obviously Teutonic.

"Velcoom to Cairo, und to mein house, Herr Tane," he said, with an accent that matched his features.

"Greetings, Herr Doktor," replied Tane cordially, as he strode across the room. He kicked off his oxfords and seated himself, cross-legged, among the cushions.

● Otis Adelbert Kline has proved himself a master of many different kinds of stories—adventure, weird, detective, and pseudo-scientific tales. His published books include "Planet of Peril," "Prince of Peril," and "Maza of the Moon." He is also the author of an unusual motion picture, "The Call of the Savage." In the eery mystery story, "Lord of the Lamia," which begins in this issue, he weaves with skilful hands the threads of an amazing legend of old Libya into an astounding story of Egypt of the present day. We feel sure you will enjoy this story.

"You vill haff a pipe und coffee? Yes?"

"By all means." Tane tossed his helmet to one side and ran his fingers through his tousled mop of damp blond ringlets. Then his eyes strayed around the room, and he said: "So this is the place you are leasing to me for two hundred pounds a year. Not half bad, if this room is a fair sample."

The doctor clapped his hands, and a dark-skinned servant girl entered noiselessly through a curtained doorway.

"A narghile und coffee, Marjanah," ordered her master.

"I hear and obey," she replied, and departed soundlessly.

Doctor Schneider turned to his guest. "You like it, eh? So do I. It iss only because I need the money so badly to carry on my vork, dot I let it go."

"By the way, how is that new expedition of yours coming on?"

"Oh, yust so-so."

"Digging for the mummy of some an-

cient princess, somewhere in the Libyan Desert, weren't you?"

The little pig-like eyes of the doctor flashed in sudden anger. "How did you know dot?" he demanded. "Somebody has been vot you call, shooting the mouth off."

"Saw it in the paper," Tane replied. "They said you had exhausted your resources searching for that mummy, and had failed."

Doctor Schneider's look of anger vanished. "Dot iss true," he admitted. "Yet mit the money you pay me for this place, I vill carry on, und in the end I vill vin. You haff brought the money? Yes?"

"First six months' rent in advance. I believe that was the bargain," Tane replied.

He drew from his inside pocket a heavy bag, which chinked musically as he placed it on the taboret.

"Count it," he invited.

Nothing loth, the doctor complied. Then he swiftly thrust the bag beneath his sash as Marjanah came in with a tray containing a steaming brass coffee-pot and two tiny cups. Behind her trudged a native boy, carrying a water-pipe, which he set before Tane.

WITH the amber mouthpiece between his lips, Tane inhaled deeply, and the pipe purred like a stroked cat. The boy turned the charcoal while Marjanah poured the coffee. Then both withdrew.

"Where's my receipt?" asked Tane, exhaling a cloud of fragrant smoke.

"Here." The doctor drew a folded paper from beneath his clothing and passed it to his visitor. "I don't vant my servants to know I'm getting so much money. Servants gossip, und news travels fast. Und the profession of robbery is an honorable vone among the Arabs—ven they can get avay mit it. I'll moofe out in the morning. By the vay, how soon do you get married?"

"My fiancée is due here in three weeks," replied Tane. "We expect to get married as soon as she arrives, and to spend our honeymoon rambling about Egypt, with this house as headquarters. Then we'll settle down here and I'll go to work on the excavations."

"Yah? Dot's nice."

"Hope you'll find time to call and see us when we—say! What's that?"

He was interrupted by the sound of chanting outside the latticed windows, which swiftly grew in volume:

La ilaha illa l'laha: Mohammadur rasul l'lah.
Sala l'lahu 'aleyhi wa salam!

"Vell! Sounds like a funeral procession. Vant to see it?"

The doctor rose and waddled to the window, swiftly followed by Tane. Six ragged blind men were walking slowly, chanting the Muslim profession of faith over and over. Behind them trudged two darwishes bearing the flags of their order. Then came an old white-bearded darwish, obviously a shaykh, a number of men, and a group of boys, one of whom carried a copy of the Koran on a small platform covered with an embroidered handkerchief. The boys were chanting in a higher and livelier tone than the blind men:

I extol the perfection of Him who hath created whatever hath form;
And subdued His servants by death;
Who bringeth to naught all His creatures with mankind;
They shall all lie in the graves.

Following the boys marched four pallbearers carrying a large coffin draped with a bright Kashmiri shawl. And behind the bier trooped half a dozen women, uttering piercing shrieks, and wailing: "O my master! O my lion! O camel of the house! O my father! O thou who

brought my food and bore my burdens! O my misfortune!" at the tops of their voices.

"Must be the corpse of some great und holy darwish," said the doctor. "Maybe even a *welee,* a Muslim saint, that they are taking to the Bab en Nasr Cemetery."

The procession continued on its way uninterrupted, until the bier was opposite the door of Tane's newly acquired house. Then the four pallbearers suddenly slumped to the ground, as if the weight of their burden had become intolerably heavy. Instantly the procession was thrown into confusion. Several of the marchers turned and tried to lift the coffin. But they appeared unable to budge it. A curious crowd quickly gathered, chatternig and gesticulating, while the blind men, the boys, the darwishes and the mourners made *zikker,* by crying "Allah" over and over in rapid monotone.

"Gott im Himmel!" exclaimed the doctor. "A saint's miracle!"

"I don't see any miracle about it," said Tane. "Those men are exhausted."

"You don't understand. Vait und see vot happens," the doctor told him.

In the meantime, the old shaykh had shouldered himself to a position beside the bier. He held up one hand for attention.

"There is no Majesty nor Might, save in Allah, the Great, the Glorious!" he cried. "It is plain that our deceased brother, on whom be God's mercy, does not wish to be buried in the Bab en Nasr Cemetery. Allah willing, I will now determine his true wishes."

So saying, he stooped, and tugged at one end of the coffin as if he would drag it toward the door of the house across the street. But it remained immovable. Puffing from his exertions, he now tried to point it toward another door on that side, but failed. "It is not in that direction," he panted. "We must try another."

He walked around to the other side, and tugged again, this time in the direction of Tane's doorway. The coffin slid easily and smoothly in that direction.

"Alhamdolillah!" he exclaimed. "God be praised! We have learned our brother's wishes. Take up the coffin, men."

With bewildered expressions on their perspiring faces, the pallbearers swung the coffin to their shoulders once more. In the meantime, the shaykh had hurried to the head of the line and turned the chanting blind men so that they now faced Tane's door. The bowab, who had been watching the proceedings with popeyed amazement, swung the door open and stepped back respectfully as the first of the procession entered.

"Now what the devil are they up to?" asked Tane.

"Follow me, und you vill see," the doctor replied.

2. *Drugged Sherbet*

By the time Tane and the doctor reached the courtyard, the last of the funeral procession was marching in. The bier, on arriving opposite the doorway, again stopped, and the pallbearers crumpled to the ground once more. Immediately the din of the chanters and mourners was redoubled as they again made *zikker:* "Allah! Allah! Allah! Allah!" repeated endlessly.

The white-bearded darwish, spying the two men before the door, stepped toward them.

"I am Shaykh Ibrahim," he said in Arabic. "Which of you two is owner of the house?"

"I am the owner," Doctor Schneider replied, "but my friend, here, is its new master, for I have just leased it to him."

"Then this occasion is singularly fortunate for both of you," said Shaykh Ib-

rahim, "for our revered and holy brother, Nureddin Ismail, has miraculously chosen to honor your house as his tomb and shrine."

"What the devil!" exclaimed Tane, in English.

"Take care, mein friend," warned the doctor. "You are in the Muslim quarter and must conform to its customs. 'Ven in Rome, do as the Romans.' "

"But I leased a home from you, not a mausoleum," objected Tane. "Good God! You don't mean to say they are actually going to bury the old buzzard here!"

"Dot's yust exactly vot they are going to do," replied the doctor. "Und if you know vot's good for you, you von't try to stop them. It vould be safer to slap a hungry lion in the face."

He turned to the old shaykh, who had been watching them in evident bewilderment, and said in Arabic: "Ve are pleased and honored that the saintly Nureddin Ismail should designate this poor house as his last resting-place. Are you aware of the exact spot where the *welee* wishes to be buried?"

"Not yet," replied Shaykh Ibrahim, "but with the help of Allah we will soon locate it."

"Hell's bells!" fumed Tane. "I won't stand for it. Don't mind it so much myself, but think of bringing a young bride into a house with the corpse of that old desert rat."

"The corpse von't bother you. It will bring you luck. This is the body of a saint, und it is a miracle you are vitnessing."

"Miracle, my eye! You can give me back my money and take your lease. I'll find another house."

"Not so fast, mein friend," grunted the doctor, a glint of anger in his watery eyes. "The deal is made, und already I, myself, have arranged for other quarters. Vot vould I do mit two houses, I ask you? Be reasonable. I couldn't help this. Vot do they say in your American contracts? 'Not responsible for acts of God.' Dot's also in your lease, if you vill take the time to read it. Today you are my guest. Tomorrow I moofe out, und the house is yours."

While the two were talking, the old man had been busying himself about the coffin, attempting to drag it this way and that. Finally, when he pulled it toward the door which led to the reception room, it yielded, sliding easily over the tiles.

"Glory to God, to whom belong all Majesty and Might!" cried the shaykh. "Our pious brother has indicated his choice."

Once more the pallbearers took up their burden, proceeding directly into the reception room with it, while the chanters and mourners, now mingled indiscriminately, crowded in after them. When Tane and the doctor finally succeeded in getting into the packed room, they found the coffin deposited on the central diwan which crossed the back of the alcove.

"Good Lord! They are not going to leave it there, are they?" gasped Tane.

"I'm afraid so," replied the doctor. "But it von't matter much. They'll vall it up und build a new diwan in front of the vall. Here come the masons, now."

While many willing hands removed mattresses, cushions, rugs, taborets and pipes from the alcove, the workmen mixed their mortar and brought in great heaps of bricks. Soon a substantial wall, reaching from one side of the alcove to the other, began to rise before the coffin.

"No reason vy ve should stay here," said the doctor, after they had watched the proceedings for some time. "Let's go upstairs." He opened a door on one

side, which revealed a stairway leading upward. "Go ahead. I'll follow," he said.

TANE mounted the stairs, the doctor climbing heavily just behind him. At the top was a small landing, which led into a spacious room almost identical with the one they had just quitted.

"If I had a hareem," said the doctor, "this vould be the ladies' sitting-room, or *majlis*. But since I haff no hareem, it vill do as vell for us as the room below." He waddled to a door at the right and swung it open. "In here is your bedroom. Ven your servant comes mit your luggage I send him up. In the meantime, I have vork to do, if you will excuse me. Marjanah vill bring you a pipe und coffee, und ve haff dinner at eight."

"Thanks," Tane replied. "See you at dinner. And don't bother about the pipe. I think I'll take a nap. I'm dog-tired after my journey."

"All right. But I'll send you up a cold sherbet, anyvay. Or maybe you like something stronger."

"No, a sherbet will do nicely," replied Tane.

"Ya, sure. Sweet dreams."

Tane had scarcely divested himself of coat, tie and shoes, and stretched himself on the diwan, when Marjanah arrived, carrying a tray on which stood a tall slender glass filled with cracked ice and a pink liquid. He tasted it; it proved to be pomegranate juice sweetened with honey.

Shortly after he had finished his refreshing drink, the American sank into a deep slumber.

THE doctor, as soon as he had left Tane, waddled across the *majlis*, descended the stairs, and entered the reception room, where the masons already had the brick wall before the coffin shoulder-high. He passed thence through another doorway via a hallway to the kitchen, where Mustafa, his Turkish cook, was preparing a huge quantity of lamb, cut in small pieces and grilled on skewers, heaping platters of rice drenched with clarified butter, and immense quantities of bread.

A half-dozen other servants stood about, sampling the food, among them Marjanah. The doctor beckoned to her.

"Prepare a sherbet for mein guest," he said, "quickly!" Then he turned to Mustafa.

"Start sending the food into the courtyard," he ordered. "I vant to get this commotion over mit."

With voluble bursts of Turkish and Arabic, and much violent pushing and pulling, the cook soon got his fellow servants started toward the courtyard, staggering under huge platters of rice, grilled lamb, and bread.

Doctor Schneider watched them impatiently. Then he turned, as Marjanah came up with a tray on which was a small glass of pomegranate juice and honey.

"Here. Giff me that tray," he commanded. "Then get me a tall glass full mit cracked ice."

As soon as her back was turned, the doctor glanced slyly at Mustafa. The cook was busy over his stove. Quickly extracting a small phial from beneath his garments, the doctor emptied its contents into the sherbet. Then he concealed the phial and waited. Presently Marjanah returned with the glassful of cracked ice. Into this he emptied the smaller glass.

"Take it up to Tane Effendi," he told her.

As the girl departed to do his bidding, the doctor rubbed his pudgy hands together and looked after her with a smile of satisfaction. Then, after giving Mustafa minute instructions about dinner, he went out into the courtyard. The male

members of the funeral cortege, together with the masons and their assistants, were seated about the platters of food which had been placed in the courtyard, eating ravenously. At the other side of the courtyard, the women were as busily engaged with a smaller consignment of meat, rice and bread.

Waddling across the court, the doctor saluted his guests as he passed them. Then he entered the reception room where Shaykh Ibrahim sat before the walled and plastered tomb, performing the office of *mulakkin,* or instructor of the dead.

"O servant of God!" he was saying. "O son of a handmaid of God! Know that tonight there will come down to thee two angels commissioned respecting thee. When they say to thee, 'Who is thy Lord?' answer them, 'God is my Lord,' in truth; and when they ask thee concerning thy Prophet, say to them, 'Mohammed is the Apostle of God,' with veracity; and when they ask thee——"

"Enough, mein friend," interrupted Doctor Schneider. "Vy go on mit this farce, ven only you and I are left in the room? Let us get down to business."

"*Waha!* You are right," replied the shaykh. "Those dogs and sons of dogs have all deserted the service at the first smell of meat. No better than hyenas and jackals are they, for they hold the comforts of the flesh to be greater than the blessings of the spirit."

"Vell, vat of it? They did yust vat ve vanted them to do. You are sure everything is all right—that the coffin is unopened?"

"Not only am I sure, but I will swear it by the triple-oath."

"Dot's enough. I belief you. For each virtuous deed is a reward. You haff done vell. I promised you fifty pounds. Here is your gold."

The shaykh greedily reached for the bag which the doctor passed to him, and emptying the clinking contents in his lap, made a swift count.

"I was reduced to beggary by the fees of the mourners," he said, after he had replaced the last gold piece in the bag.

"Another pound for that," the doctor told him, tossing a piece into his lap.

"And the pallbearers demanded a ruinous sum because of the extra work."

"Another pound for them, und it is the last," the doctor told him, flipping him another gold piece. "Go, now, und partake of the food in the *hosh* mit the others. Then get them out of mein house as soon as you can. I haff vork to do."

3. *A Very Strange Mummy*

When John Tane awoke, the full moon was shining down on him through the ornate lattice of the *mashrabiyeh* window, making intricate shadow patterns on the diwan and floor. He sat up with a start, and was instantly aware of a headache and a feeling of nausea, accompanied by a peculiar bitter taste and a mighty thirst.

He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Nearly midnight! He had slept eight hours. Instantly he realized that only one thing could have produced this long sleep with its disagreeable after-effects. He had been drugged. But by whom? And for what purpose?

Someone, he noticed, had drawn a coverlet over him. And on looking around the room he discovered that his baggage had been delivered. That meant that his Arabian servant, Ali, had been here. Perhaps he was sleeping in the *majlis* outside his door. Softly he called: "Ali."

There was no response.

He called more loudly: "Ali!"

Still no answer.

Shirtless and shoeless, he rose and

walked to the door, his feet making no sound on the thick rug. The *majlis* was lighted only by the moon, but he easily made out the form of a man lying on a mattress beside the door. A closer inspection revealed the hatchet-like features and thin wiry form of his servant, Ali.

Tane shook the sleeper—gently at first, then with considerable violence. But he was unable to awaken him. Evidently Ali, also, had been drugged, and quite heavily.

As he stood, nursing his splitting head and wondering what it all meant, Tane heard the sound of somebody running rapidly on the floor below, followed by a thud and a groan. Then there was a sound as of someone dragging a heavy body across the floor. Obviously, there was deviltry afoot, and he and his servant had been drugged in order that they might not see or hear what was going on. Swiftly and soundlessly he bounded to the stairway and descended to the reception room. Like the upper rooms, it was unlighted save by the rays of the moon, but a faint yellow light filtered between two silken curtains that hung before one of the doorways. And from behind the curtain there came a strange muttering in a tongue that seemed vaguely familiar. Suddenly he recognized it as ancient Egyptian.

Pushing the curtains aside, he crept along the hallway behind them until he came to the door of a room through which the yellow light streamed and from which the sounds emanated. The light, he saw, came from two short, thick candles set in a paneled niche in the wall. The panels had been pushed to the right and left, revealing a dark opening, before which stood a tall thin man with a scraggy gray beard and a prominent hooked nose that gave him a hawk-like look, dressed in the costume of a Persian of rank and wealth. In his hand he held a yellow scroll which he was reading aloud by the light of the two candles.

Except that the cushions and coverlets on one of the diwans were in disarray, Tane saw no sign of a struggle. He wondered if this man were an intruder, who had come to read some ancient litany for the departed *welee*.

"Pardon me," he said. "I thought I heard——"

His sentence remained unfinished, for at the first sound of his voice the hawk-faced man dropped the scroll and turned, regarding him with glittering eyes. Then his lean, claw-like hand shot down and came up with a short loaded club which had been thrust beneath his sash. With a cat-like agility most remarkable in a man of his years, he sprang straight for Tane.

The American stepped nimbly to one side, barely in time to avoid a vicious blow. Then he leaped in, seized the Persian's arm, and clamped on a bone-crushing wrist lock. Instantly the weapon clattered to the floor. Tane immediately shifted his hold, drew the arm of his attacker up over his right shoulder, and heaved. The hawk-faced man described a sweeping arc, and alighted in front of the doorway with considerable violence.

Tane bent and retrieved the club, then stood awaiting a renewal of the attack. But to his surprize, his antagonist, who had sprung to his feet and drawn a wicked-looking knife, suddenly darted out of the door and down the hall. The American followed, but was barely in time to see the hawk-nosed one dash across the reception room and out into the courtyard.

FURTHER pursuit being useless, Tane returned to the lighted room and, impelled by curiosity, went up to the niche to examine the scroll which the old man had been reading. Instead of paper,

parchment, or papyrus, it was of thin beaten gold, on which the hieroglyphic characters were embossed and painted with lacquer. He instantly recognized the characters as very ancient, apparently belonging to the second or third dynasty. They were so battered, and so much of the lacquer had cracked off, that reading them was quite difficult; so he pronounced the words aloud to make sure of the sound and sense of each:

Rekh nefer st'er t'et-a ten au atef-a neter nefer Re au mut-a heqt nebt taui Pilatra——

As he read, he mentally translated:

O fortunate man! Sleeping, I speak to you. I am the daughter of the beautiful god Re, and Pilatra, Royal Princess of the Two Lands. Being less than goddess, I must sleep, but being more than woman, I never die, and blessed indeed are you who awaken me. For though all Libya once bent beneath my scepter, you now have the power to make me your slave, for ever——

Tane read on and on, but beyond this point, though he was able to pronounce the words by means of the phonetic symbols, he could not understand them. Evidently they constituted a mystic formula, couched in some ancient and long-forgotten language.

So absorbed had he been with the ancient scroll that he had noticed no other details. Now, however, as he laid it down, he turned his attention to the dark opening at the rear of the niche. Just inside the opening, he was surprized to see the side of a coffin, the lid of which had been removed and tilted back against a newly built brick wall behind it. Why, it was the rear of the wall the masons had built that afternoon! And this must be the coffin of Nureddin Ismail! The panels of the niche in this room had opened into the alcove of the reception room. Now they opened into the tomb of the *welee*.

Impelled by curiosity, Tane leaned forward and peered into the coffin. Then he exclaimed in amazement. For it contained, instead of the shrouded corpse of an old darwish, a richly gilded and lacquered mummy-case, the lid of which was fashioned and colored in the likeness of the swathed form of a slender girl, with lovely, youthful features crowned by a royal diadem that was fronted with a golden uræus.

Instantly, the archeologist in Tane came to the fore. This, he realized, was a rare find, such as might not be turned up again in a century of searching. Eager to examine the mummy, he carefully lifted the cover, and leaned it back against the lid of the coffin. Then he gasped in astonishment. For instead of a mummified human being, he saw only a long, rope-like thing which stretched from one end of the mummy-case to the other, swathed in musty linen wrappings that were brown with age. At the head-end of the case, the tip of the thing entered a jewel-encrusted golden crown, fronted by a uræus similar to the one depicted on the lid.

Wondering what could be wrapped in the cerements, he loosened and began unwinding those at the head end. So weakened were they by the dry rot of countless ages, that despite the utmost care, they broke and fell apart at almost every turn. Beneath them were stronger wrappings, which he also unwound, revealing the scaly head and body of a large haje, or African cobra, in so perfect a state of preservation that the black and yellow coloring of its gleaming scales was as bright as that of a healthy, living specimen.

Tane was not surprized to find a serpent swathed in mummy wrappings, for he knew that the ancient Egyptians embalmed and buried many of their sacred beasts, birds and reptiles, as well as favorite household pets. But he was sur-

prized to find it in so perfect a state of preservation, and in a coffin which had obviously been constructed for the mummy of a royal princess, with its head in a jeweled golden crown which might once have graced the fair brow of the lovely being whose likeness was depicted on the lid.

Carefully, he slid the diadem from beneath the serpent head, and held it up beside one of the candles for a detailed examination. The uræus and framework were of solid gold, exquisitely wrought, and studded with gems, the most brilliant of which were two sparkling emeralds that formed the eyes of the serpent. Only fragments remained of the cloth lining and plumes—the "two feathers of truth"—which, like the cerements of the serpent, had reached a state of extreme fragility.

Some tiny hieroglyphics graven inside the framework and containing a royal cartouche, caught his eye. He read:

> Wrought for the great goddess Lamia, holy and beautiful Queen of All Libya, Daughter of the Sun and Mistress of Life and Death, by the least of her slaves, Mena the goldsmith.

Scarcely had he finished reading these lines when a rustling sound attracted his attention. Turning, he started in surprize and alarm, at sight of a large black-and-yellow cobra crawling out upon the ledge of the niche. Knowing how deadly the bite of a haje can be, he leaped back instinctively in an effort to get out of reach of those terrible fangs. At this, the snake slithered down from the ledge and glided swiftly toward him, knocking over and extinguishing one of the candles as it did so.

Wildly, he looked about him for some avenue of escape, but he could see none, for already the reptile was between him and the doorway. In his defenseless position, he used the only weapon within reach, the short club which he had taken from the hawk-nosed intruder, throwing it with all his might. Straight for the serpent's head flew the loaded billy, yet the snake avoided it with ease, and came on. Desperate, Tane hurled the only remaining thing he might use as a weapon—the heavy golden crown.

Though his aim was good, the serpent once more dodged the throw, and the crown rolled out beneath the hangings that curtained the doorway. Fearful of those deadly fangs, he again leaped back, but this time his feet encountered an unexpected obstruction. He fell over backward, alighting on the floor in front of a diwan.

Then two things happened simultaneously. The remaining candle in the niche sputtered out, and a hollow groan sounded from the diwan behind him.

4. *Real or Unreal?*

TANE scrambled to his feet, and strove to see the creature that menaced him. But there was no window in the room to admit the moonlight, and his eyes could not penetrate the darkness. From the direction in which he had seen the serpent, he heard an ominous rustling, which grew fainter, and presently ceased. This led him to believe that the reptile had coiled and was ready to strike. In the meantime, there came the sound of heavy, labored breathing from the diwan, followed by another groan.

Suddenly he remembered a box of safety matches in his trousers pocket, and lighted one. The first thing the circle of yellow light revealed was the object which had tripped him. It was a man's leg, projecting from beneath a pile of rugs and pillows on the diwan. He held the match high above his head until it burned his fingers, as he strained his

eyes into the gloom for sight of the serpent. But it had disappeared.

Lighting another match, he turned his attention to the person on the couch. Swiftly, he pulled away the rugs and cushions, revealing the rotund form and porcine features of Doctor Schneider. The doctor's face was streaked with blood from a cut on his forehead, and he was breathing heavily.

"You!" Tane exclaimed, staring down at the doctor in amazement. "What happened?"

"A robber," groaned the doctor. "He took mein gold und broke mein head. There is a lamp on that taboret. Light it, und help me to the bathroom. I must have vater und a bandage."

Tane located the lamp and lighted it with a third match.

"There's a big haje loose in the house," he said, as he helped the doctor to arise. "We'll have to watch our step."

"A haje! *Ach, mein Gott!* But vere—vere did it come from?"

"I saw it crawl out of the niche. By Jove! I must have unwrapped it myself. There was a snake swathed in mummy-cloth and I thought it was dead. Good joke on me."

"Good joke! *Gott im Himmel!* If only it *vas* a joke! But neffer mind. Help me to the bathroom."

Tane assisted the doctor to arise. Then, juggling the lamp with one hand, and supporting the injured man with the other, he led him across the room and through the doorway, meanwhile keeping a sharp lookout for the venomous haje.

"Second door to the right," grunted the doctor. "Ach, mein head! It goes round like a pinwheel."

There was a well-stocked medicine cabinet in the bathroom, and Tane, after mixing the doctor a stiff drink of brandy and water, applied an antiseptic and deftly bandaged his head.

"I feel better, now," said Doctor Schneider, when Tane had finished. "Better haff a drink, yourself. You look as if you need one."

"You said it." Tane poured out three fingers, and took his brandy neat. "Maybe it will help to clear my head. Somebody drugged my sherbet. And my servant, Ali, sleeps as if he, also, had been drugged."

"It must haff been an inside chob," said the doctor. "Someone learned I had all that gold, und planned to rob me. But tell me vot happened before you found me. Did you catch sight of the robber?"

"I chased an old, hawk-nosed Persian out of the place," Tane replied. "He was reading from a golden scroll before the niche, behind which the mummy-case was so cleverly concealed this afternoon."

"Scroll? Mummy-case?" The doctor appeared puzzled. "But tell me, mein friend, had he finished reading the scroll when you appeared?"

"I don't think so. In fact, I'm quite sure he hadn't, for he was still on the part I could understand. There were a number of words that must have been in some pre-dynastic dialect, which I could not understand."

"So! Then *you* read the scroll?"

"Yes."

"Aloud?"

"Aloud."

"Hum. Und you say you saw a mummy-case?"

"I not only saw a mummy-case, but there was a mummified serpent in it, and a golden diadem. I unwrapped the serpent. And it, or another, later crawled out of the niche, knocked over one of the candles, and came toward me. I was examining the diadem at the time, and

first tried to stop the snake by hurling the club of the Persian. I missed, and so threw the only thing I had at hand—the crown. The serpent dodged, one of the candles burned out, and then I heard you groan."

"Vell. The first thing ve better do iss look for that snake. It von't be safe for any of us to sleep mit it crawling around the house. I haff a couple of simitars hanging on the vall of the reception room. Ve'll get them und look around."

Cautiously, they made their way to the reception room. The doctor took down two crossed simitars from the wall and handed one to Tane. Then he lighted another lamp.

"Suppose you look in the courtyard," he said, "vile I search in the back of the house. Say, vat about that crown you threw at the haje?"

"It rolled out into the hall."

"Funny ve didn't see it. But neffer mind. I look for it, also. If you see or hear anything strange, call me—*schnell!*"

LANTERN in one hand and simitar in the other, Tane opened the door and stepped out into the courtyard. Here the moonlight was so bright that the lamp was superfluous, except in the darker corners, where he poked about cautiously with the simitar. After making a complete examination of the courtyard, he stepped into the entryway. At the second turn, he came upon the body of a man, lying with arms outflung. It was Wardan, the bowab. Tane bent over him. One look convinced him that the doorkeeper was dead. His tarbush was lying on the tiles, and the back of his shaven head was crushed in, as if by some heavy instrument. The door stood slightly ajar, and Tane closed and bolted it. Then he made his way back to the reception room. It was untenanted, but the glint of lamplight from the hallway told him that there was someone in the other room. Parting the curtains, he traversed the hallway and entered the room, where he found the doctor staring at the niche.

"Vell. Vot luck?" asked the doctor, turning at his entrance.

"I didn't find the snake," Tane told him, "but I found your bowab, murdered."

"Wardan dead! Poor devil. Then he vasn't in on the robbery plot. Say, vot's all this cock-und-bull story you haff been telling me about mummy-cases und snakes und crowns? There vas no crown lying in the hallvay. Und vere is the golden scroll? I found the club all right, in here on the floor—a deadly thing loaded mit lead. But you couldn't haff seen a mummy-case behind these panels. Look."

Tane looked. Instead of the dark opening behind the panels, he now saw a solid brick wall. He looked closer. It was not the new wall put up by the masons that afternoon, but a very old wall, which evidently had stood for many generations. And it fitted so tightly against the back of the niche that nothing much thicker than a sheet of paper could have been inserted between it and the sliding panels.

"Well I'll be——"

Tane leaned over and tapped the wall with his knuckles. Then, setting down the lamp, he flung his entire weight against it, pressing with both hands. But it was as solid as the house itself.

"It appears, mein friend," said the doctor, gravely, "that the drug you were given made you see strange visions. Hashish, maybe, eh?"

"But I tell you I saw and touched all those things. They were real. I handled them. I read the scroll."

"Tactile impressions are as easily imagined as visual," replied the doctor. "You can see for yourself that you couldn't possibly haff looked into any opening be-

hind the niche, unless you haff X-ray eyes und can look through a vall. Und even so, you vouldn't haff X-ray hands that could reach through the vall. No, mein friend, you are the victim of a drug-dream—a hallucination. Better forget that part of it when you talk to the police. I'll have to notify them, on account of Wardan's death. Just tell them you chased out a robber who had slain Wardan, knocked me unconscious, und robbed me."

"Maybe you're right," agreed Tane, "but it's damned queer, just the same."

"You vait here," said the doctor. "I'll go und call the police. Und don't try to make them believe that drug-dream, or ve are liable to be accused of murder."

The doctor took one of the lamps and went out. As soon as the echo of his footsteps had died away, Tane took up his lamp and once more went to the niche. Again he examined the brick wall and the sliding panels. But he could find nothing to indicate that they had not been in this same position for generations. Presently he thought of the candles which had been burning on each side of the niche. Each had been in a small brass tray, but one, he recalled, had been upset by the serpent. There should be some tallow on the ledge. A careful examination revealed none. Then he looked above the places where the candles had stood. Above each was a spot which was considerably darker than the surrounding wood. He rubbed one of the spots, and his finger came away with a smudge of greasy carbon. So there had been two candles burning there, after all. But what had become of them? And what had happened to interpose a solid brick wall against the back of the niche during the time he had been exploring the courtyard?

As he was about to return to his seat on the diwan, he noticed a white splotch on the floor. Bending, he picked it up. It was a piece of tallow which had spattered from the overturned candle. At the sound of approaching footsteps, he thrust this meager bit of evidence into his pocket, resumed his seat on the diwan, and lighted a cigarette.

5. Hagg Nadeem.

DOCTOR SCHNEIDER waddled into the room, followed by four burly native policemen.

"There is the *hashishin!*" he said in Arabic, pointing a pudgy finger at Tane. "Overpower him quickly, for he is very dangerous. He slew Wardan mit a single blow, und came near to killing me."

"Why, you——"

Tane sprang to his feet, and lashed out with both fists as the four husky natives pounced upon him. His first blow found a brown face, and its owner staggered back to crash against the opposite wall. His second caught another policeman in the midriff, and doubled him up, left him gasping for breath. But the other two each caught an arm, and their combined weight bore him down upon the diwan.

The American pretended to go limp. Then he suddenly wrenched his right arm free. The man on his left still clung, but a short-arm punch to the point of the jaw broke his hold, and he slumped to the floor. Again the man on his right seized his arm, but he drove a crashing left hook to the fellow's ear, tore his arm from the clutching brown hands, and leaped to his feet.

At this instant, a tall, lean, hatchet-faced Arab appeared in the doorway. It was Ali, and in his hand he held Tane's Colt forty-five.

"Good boy, Ali!" he exclaimed. "Give me that gun."

Then he whirled, facing the five men in the room. "Hands up, all of you," he ordered, "or I'll shoot, and shoot to kill."

Sheepishly, the four policemen raised their hands. But the doctor paid no attention to the command.

"You, too, Schneider," said Tane, pointing the pistol in his direction.

"Go ahead, shoot me. You vouldn't dare," scoffed the doctor.

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

The forty-five roared, and the German's silken cap leaped from his bald head.

"*Himmel!* Vould you murder me?" the doctor cried, elevating his pudgy hands with surprizing alacrity.

"A moment ago you accused me of being a murderer," Tane replied. "I might be tempted to live up to the name. Steady!" His gun muzzle swung toward one of the policemen whose hands were wavering downward, and once more they became stiffly perpendicular.

"Now, doctor," said Tane, "what's this all about? And why did you accuse me of murder after I drove off your attacker and bound up your wound? You'd better come clean, or——"

The sentence remained unfinished, for at that instant he suddenly felt something hard prodding him in the back, and a low, well-modulated voice from behind him said: "I'd advise you to drop that gun."

Tane dropped the forty-five. There was nothing else for him to do. As the heavy weapon thudded down on the rug, the pressure on his back was removed. Then the curved handle of a Malacca cane flashed out from behind him, hooked the pistol, and dragged it back.

"And now, *effendi,* you will walk to the diwan and seat yourself beside Doctor Schneider," continued the suave voice.

Tane walked obediently to the diwan, turned, and sat down beside the doctor. Then a man, evidently an Egyptian, stepped through the curtained doorway. He was slender, of medium height, with dreamy brown eyes and a closely cropped, jet-black beard. He wore a green turban and a brown burnoose which was open in front, revealing a gold-embroidered white *kamis,* confined at the waist by a scarlet sash. Tane judged him to be about forty years of age. In one hand he carried a Malacca stick, and in the other, the American's revolver. And Tane suddenly realized that he had been neatly tricked—forced to drop his weapon by the prod of a walking-stick.

"Hagg Nadeem!" exclaimed the doctor. "How in——"

"At your service, as always, Doctor Schneider," said the Egyptian, politely, with a profound bow. "I happened to be passing, and heard the sound of a shot. The door was ajar, so I came in to investigate. And now, perhaps, you will acquaint me with the cause of this disturbance, as well as the reason why four of my men have been held up at the point of a gun in your house."

Tane had heard of Hagg Nadeem. And the reports he had heard had been so many, so varied, so tinted with superstition, and so utterly preposterous, that he had almost come to regard the man as a purely mythical figure. Not only was he said to be an *alim,* a Muslim holy man, learned in the Koran and the faith of al Islam, and a *hagg* who had made the prescribed pilgrimage to Medina and Mecca, but he was also an Oxford graduate, and well informed in the sciences and the arts. Among his own people, many revered him for his piety and religious learning. Others condemned him as a *jinni* in league with Shaitan the Damned, a necromancer, a worshipper of Egypt's ancient and terrible gods, and a practiser

of both white and black magic. Though he bore no official title, soldiers, police, and other public servants, both military and civil, bowed to his authority without question. And it was whispered that he was a member, if not the actual chief, of the secret police of the country.

For a moment, the German seemed too stunned with amazement to reply to the query of the Egyptian. But the latter persisted.

"I await your explanation, doctor," he said.

"I haff already made mein explanation to these four bolicemen," grunted the doctor, at length. "That man," indicating Tane, "killed my bowab mit a club, und tried to brain me. I escaped him, und called the bolice."

"The doctor," said Tane, "is a cock-eyed liar."

"One moment, *effendi,*" said Nadeem. "Permit me to finish questioning him." He turned once more to Doctor Schneider. "You say this man tried to kill you. Why?"

"He vas drug-crazed—mit hashish, probably. Don't know vere he got hold of it. I calmed him down, took the club avay from him, und vent und bound up my head. Then I called the bolice. Ven they tried to arrest him he fought like a fiend. Then his servant came und gave him the pistol, und ven I vouldn't put up my hands, he took a shot at me. The bullet vent through my cap, as you can see." He pointed to the punctured bit of headgear behind him.

"Why, of all the unmitigated prevaricators!" Tane's rage all but choked him.

"Here's the club," continued the doctor, tossing the loaded billy at the feet of the Egyptian. "He told some vild, hare-brained story about candles burning in the niche, an ancient scroll of solid gold, und a mummy-case mit a snake in it. I had to humor him in his murderous mood, of course, but I didn't belief him. Hashish makes men see queer things."

"Quite true," agreed Hagg Nadeem.

He turned to Tane. "May I inquire your name?" he asked.

"John Tane of the American Archeological Society."

"What were you doing in this house at this time of night?"

"I rented the house from Doctor Schneider yesterday afternoon," Tane replied. "Paid him six months' rent in advance. He was to move out in the morning."

"I see. Sorry, Mr. Tane, but I'm afraid I'll have to place you under arrest. This, I take it, is your servant. Since you are partly disrobed, I'll permit you to send him up for such clothing and other articles as you require, with two of my men as an escort."

"This is a damned outrage," fumed Tane. "You'll hear from my Government on this, and don't forget it."

HAGG NADEEM smiled sweetly, seemingly unimpressed. While Tane gave orders to Ali, Hagg Nadeem lighted a cigarette and strolled carelessly about the room, as if there were nothing there that particularly interested him. Yet Tane, somehow, felt that his searching brown eyes were taking in every detail.

Ali returned in a few minutes with the required things, and deftly assisted his master in making himself presentable.

"Since your servant is not accused, he may remain here and look after your things," said the *hagg*. "And now, if you are ready, we will start."

He turned to Doctor Schneider. "You will be expected to appear before the kadi, to prefer charges against this gentleman in the morning," he told him. "Come, Mr. Tane."

As they passed through the outer door, Tane noticed that the grisly object which had once been Wardan the bowab had been removed—probably by his relatives.

They traversed several narrow, deserted streets in silence. Then Nadeem said: "Though I grieve to confess it, our jail is rather a filthy place. Most of the malefactors brought there crawl with vermin, and they are none too clean. I'm afraid it will be very disagreeable for you."

"I don't doubt it," replied Tane. "But why rub it in?"

"I was about to suggest," continued the *hagg*, "that you spend the night in my home—let us say, as my guest. Under guard, of course."

"Thoughtful of you. But I wouldn't think of imposing——"

"No imposition, I assure you. It will be a pleasure. After all, you have not yet been *proved* a murderer—only accused. It may be that you are entirely innocent of even any complicity in the matter."

"Thanks for the charitable thought."

They strode on again for some moments without conversation. Then the Egyptian paused before a doorway, and rapped sharply with his Malacca. A sleepy bowab opened the door. "Here is my house," said the *hagg*. "*Bismillah*. Enter in the Name of Allah."

"Praise His Name," replied Tane, in answer to the Arabic politeness, and stepped inside, followed by his host and the four guards.

The weird, uncanny and startling events that follow in next month's chapters of this story are a literary treat that you can not afford to miss. Reserve your copy now at your news dealer's.

Sonnet of the Unsleeping Dead

By PARKER WHITE

That night when all the madness of the sea
met with the pelting clatter of the rain
to guard her fresh-dug tomb, despairingly
I thought I could not know despair again.
The widower of beauty, I resolved
to take bright horror to my lonely bed.
Now sage in arcane learning, I had solved
the puzzle of the living and the dead.

The last strange words were spoken, and the last
unguents bestowed upon her firm cold flesh.
Her chill sojourn beyond the tomb was past;
she moved. And then I saw (this was the knife
which freed my mind from sanity's frail mesh)
her eyes too bright with that which was not life.

Clutching Hands of Death

By HAROLD WARD

A tale of terror—of a weird surgical operation performed in France—and a ghastly horror that stalked by night

JOHN HURST met death in the electric chair today. Standing on the brink of eternity, he refused to make any statement, maintaining the same enigmatical silence that had marked his demeanor from the day of his arrest.

Those who followed the case will remember that I represented Hurst at the trial. There was little I could do, for he positively declined to allow me to put up any defense. From the very first he knew that he was doomed; in fact, he told me several times that he wanted to die.

Yesterday I visited him for the last time, conveying to him the sad—to me—news that the governor had refused to grant a reprieve. He received the information with a smile.

"You didn't think that he would, did you?" he asked. "But, nevertheless, I appreciate what you have done for me."

He accompanied me to the cell door. Then, as we shook hands for the last time, he handed me a sealed envelope.

"The truth is in this," he said. "When I am gone, give it to the press. Nobody will believe what I have written, but I, at least, have had the pleasure of putting it down without interference from——"

He hesitated for the infinitesimal part of a second.

"Never mind," he finally resumed. "It is all in there. I'd like my friends to know the whole damnable story."

This morning I sat beside the radio waiting for the flash that told me John Hurst had gone to his maker. Then I opened the envelope. For a moment the thought came over me that the man had gone insane. But as I reconstructed the crime for which he was executed, I realized that John Hurst was telling the truth. But the reader must be his own judge. The narrative follows:

John Hurst's Statement

THIS is not a war story. Yet the horrible series of events which I am about to relate had their beginning in a base hospital somewhere in France.

My last distinct recollection before that was the nightmarish, indescribable second when the captain held his hand aloft, his eyes glued on his wrist-watch. He dropped his arm to indicate that the zero hour had come. We went over the top, a scattered khaki line. I recall no more.

I have a faint remembrance of jolting along in an ambulance on the way to the rear. I was sick—horribly sick—and

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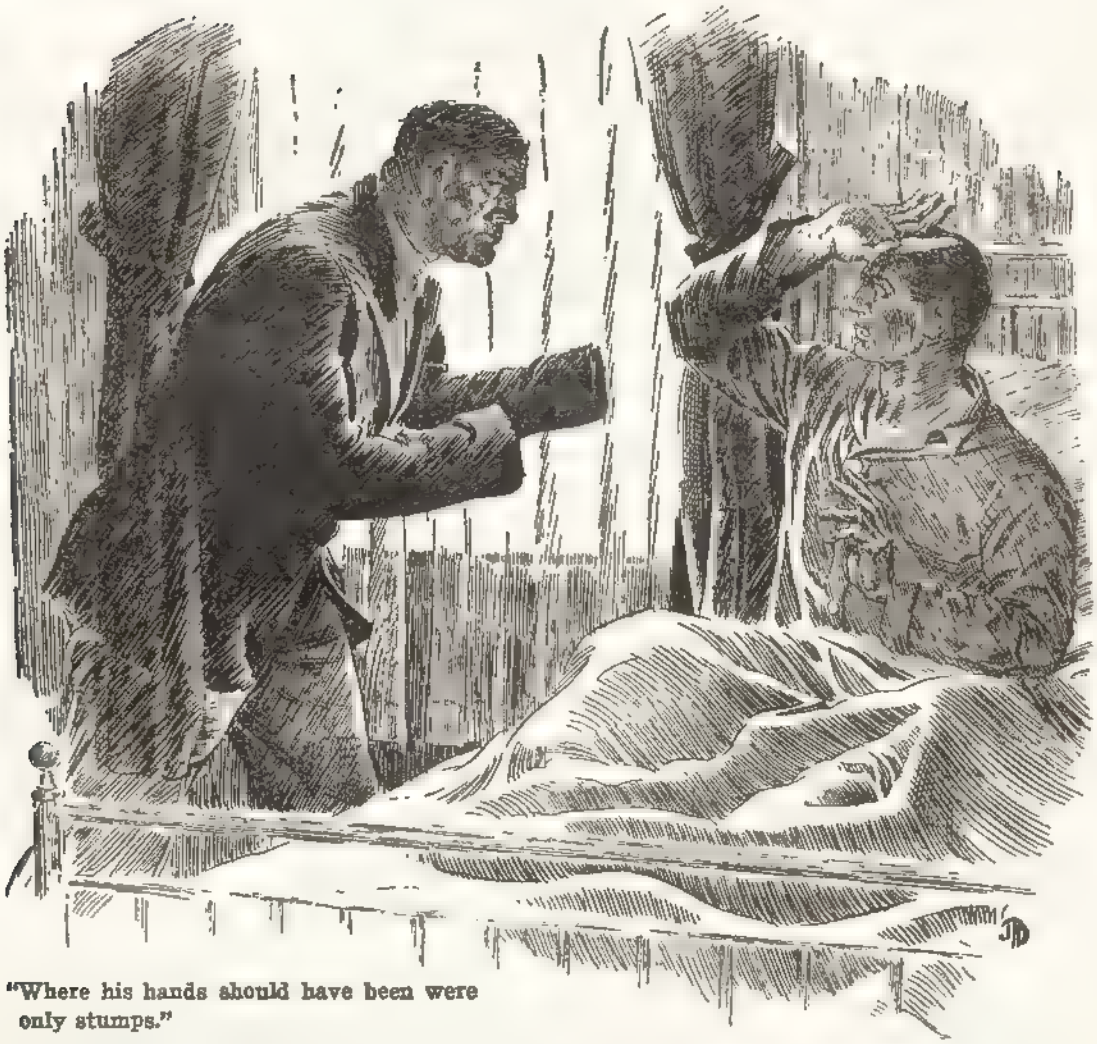


"Where his hands should have been were only stumps."

weak. My arms felt numb, dead. I glanced down at them. My right hand was gone—evidently shattered by the premature explosion of the hand grenade I had been carrying when we went over the top. My left hand was so badly mangled that even I, a layman, could see that amputation would be necessary. I knew, too, that my chances for recovery were about one in ten thousand. Nor did I care.

I was reconciled to death, when I thought of it, which was seldom, for most of the time I was unconscious. Some first-aid man had bandaged me after a fashion, putting ligatures on my arms to halt the bleeding; I lacked the strength or I would have pulled them off; for what man cares to go through life with two stumps for hands?

I do not remember when I reached the hospital. My mind is a blank on many points. In fact, most of the events which I am about to relate happened while I was in a sort of trance. At other times I was in a sort of "twilight sleep," catching indistinct snatches of conversation, but paying no attention to what was going on about me.

Two men were talking.

"I've been wanting to do an operation like this ever since I quit school. . . . Here's one that is made to order for me. . . . Tell the nurse to get them ready. . . ."

" . . . Both going . . . die. . . ."

"That's the point. But with such an operation there's one chance in a million that the fellow whose hands are off will live. The other has . . . no . . ."

". . . will kill him. . . ."

"What's the odds? . . . Matter of a few hours one way or the other. . . ."

The voices seemed to come from a great distance. Yet I knew that the speakers were standing beside me. And, for some reason, I knew that they were talking about me. I did not care.

Then I drifted off again.

I seemed to be floating through space . . . I was as light as a balloon . . . I . . .

I realized suddenly that there was a smell of disinfectants in the air. I was sick to my stomach . . . and sleepy—oh, so sleepy. I managed to open my eyes, trying to recollect what had happened. Was it morning? Were we getting ready to go over the top again? Then my blurred vision made out the outlines of a clean, white bed and I knew that I was in a hospital.

I closed my weary eyes and dropped back to sleep.

For some reason I seemed to be the prize catch of the season from a medical standpoint. I was in a private ward; that much I realized, even though I was in a semi-stupor most of the time. The room was constantly filled with doctors and nurses; there was an almost incessant buzz of whispered conversation through which I drifted drowsily. I know now, what I did not know then, that I was kept under the influence of opiates. I think that I vaguely wondered why so much attention was being paid to me, a common sergeant. Yet I cared little. I was too ill, too weak, even to speculate.

Time had no value to me. For several weeks I must have hovered between life and death, realizing little. Then I took a turn for the better; this much I knew from the tone of the conversation.

It was hard to realize that my hands were gone. I often imagined that I could feel the touch of the bandages against them. Yet something back in my subconscious mind told me that such was not the case. It was worse at night. It seemed at times as if someone were trying to seize my hands and drag them from me. Sometimes I woke up screaming, imagining that a wraith-like form was hovering over me. It was vague, indistinct; it always disappeared when I opened my eyes. The nurse was constantly outside the door; the touch of her cool fingers on my fevered brow usually quieted me.

As I grew better I cursed myself for a fool for allowing my imagination to run riot. I had heard stories of men who had lost their limbs and who, for weeks afterward—sometimes even for months—imagined at times that they were still in possession of their complete bodies. I remembered a tale my mother once told me of a boy who had had his fingers cut off in an accident and who cried for days, asserting that his fingers were crossed. In desperation, a member of the family had finally dug up the buried digits and found that, in rattling around in the box before burial, they had become twisted. He had straightened them out and the boy cried no more.

So, as I say, as I began to regain my strength, I began to grow morose. I often wished for death. For who cares to go through life a helpless cripple?

The day came when the young doctor, dropping in to dress my wounds, found me wide awake. The superintendent of

nurses was with him. He greeted me with a smile and a cheery nod.

I turned my head away as he unfastened the bandages.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed with enthusiasm. "Look for yourself, Hurst."

"I have no desire to gaze upon my helplessness," I answered bitterly.

For an instant he looked at me. Then realization swept over him.

"God in heaven! Is it possible that you fail to understand that a miracle has been performed?" he demanded. "Turn your head, man. Turn your head and be prepared for a happy surprize."

Something told me to do as he commanded.

Where there had been but mangled stumps there were now two hands. Big hands, they were—horrible hands, the fingers stubby, muscular, the nails thick, the backs covered with coarse, black hair. But they were hands, nevertheless—*my hands*. Yet they were not my hands. My hands had been slender, the fingers spatulate. These were simian hands—the hands of a caveman. Yet when I tried them I felt movement in them. I wriggled the fingers a trifle.

I turned to the young doctor in astonishment. Was I dreaming—the victim of another hallucination?

He sensed my bewilderment and hastened to explain.

"The miracle of modern surgery," he said. "It is to be regretted that Colonel Ernest is not here to gaze upon the triumph of his skill. Unfortunately, he was transferred back to the States shortly after doing the work——"

"I—I do not understand," I said thickly, gazing down at the stubby ill-shaped hands—my hands—again.

"It is the first time in history that such a grafting operation has been performed," he went on. "True, never before has a surgeon had the opportunity, for what man would give to another man his legs or his arms? But here the conditions were different. You were little better than dead, but the man in the cot beside you was worse—practically dying. Doctor Ernest took the one chance in a million. He removed the hands from the living man and grafted them onto your arms. He worked for hours, tying the muscles —the bones—together. And such was his skill that they knit. But Colonel Ernest is one of our greatest surgeons. This proves his skill."

"The other man?" I asked.

"Naturally, he died," the young surgeon laughed. "But he would have died, anyway. For that matter, so would you. Out of what was left of two men, Doctor Ernest made one good body again."

"His name—poor devil?" I asked weakly.

The young doctor—a lieutenant, I think he was—shook his head.

"His identification tag was lost," he answered. "He was a blooming Englishman, I think, but he was in French uniform."

I AM going to skip the years that followed. Naturally, it was hard to get used to the hands. The borrowed fingers were unskilful, clumsy. But I learned to use them as my own, acquiring a deftness that had been denied me at first. And so, as the flesh and muscles co-ordinated and became one entity, I almost forgot that they were not my own, except when I looked at them. Sometimes they made me shudder. They were cruel hands, it seemed to me. Yet they were better far than no hands at all.

But I could not entirely forget that they were borrowed. There was a vague, indefinable *something* that seemed wrong. At first I only sensed it. Then the feeling grew stronger and stronger until I seemed to have it with me constantly. It was a

sensation of being watched—of being spied upon. Time after time I caught myself turning suddenly, thinking that some alien presence was in the room.

Little things were constantly coming up to intensify this feeling. Let me give one instance: Like most young men, I fell in love. The girl of my choice was visiting in another city. I sat down to write to her. Naturally, my thoughts were of love. And it was of my love for her that I was writing. Having finished the letter, I was about to place it in the envelope to mail it before I went to bed when something prompted me to glance over it.

It was filled with profanities—vile things as unlike me as day is unlike the night. My hand had not obeyed the dictates of my brain.

There were innumerable other instances of a similar nature. I began to notice that they always occurred at night.

Then came the beginning of the end.

It was in the middle of the night. I was sleeping dreamlessly, when suddenly I was awakened by a feeling of suffocation—of being throttled. Fingers were gripped about my throat, pressing against my windpipe. I breathed with difficulty. I was choking. I tried to raise my hands to defend myself. My arms were numb, useless.

Across the bed I floundered. The pressure against my gullet increased. My tongue was protruding, my eyes bulging from their sockets.

The room was, I believe that I have said, in darkness. The shades were up, and a vagrant moonbeam filtered through the window. In my struggles I chanced to cross it.

I saw my own hands pressing against my throat! I was choking myself to death!

I shrieked with horror as I jerked my hands away from my throat. Yet it was a struggle. Something within me rebelled against it—told me to choke and choke and choke until all of the breath had left my body.

To almost every man there comes at least once in a lifetime that gripping, heart-stopping, blood-congealing sensation that we know as fear. It swept over me now. For a vague, indistinct form stood beside the bed.

I tried to reach for the gun beneath my pillow. My laggard hands refused to obey the impulses of my brain. I could only lie there, the icy chills racing up and down my spinal column as that horrible, indescribable thing leered at me. It was a man—that much I could see in spite of the darkness—a tall man, broad-shouldered, his face flat and brutal. He glared at me with eyes filled with hatred and demoniacal fury. How do I know this, since the room was in darkness? I can not answer that question. Perhaps I *felt* him—sensed him. I only know that I did see him distinctly in spite of the blackness of the night.

And I saw something else, even though it was but for an instant before he faded away.

Where his hands should have been were only stumps!

He held them up to my gaze. I shrieked again, for something seemed to link this thing—this wraith with me.

For a split second my brain raced like an engine robbed of its balance wheel. Yet in that infinitesimal passage of time the whole truth was revealed to me.

This was the man whose dying body had been robbed—desecrated—in order to provide me with hands. He was dead—yes, but part of him was still alive. Alive and attached to me—he was a part of me. I was keeping him lingering between this world and the next. He was dead and yet alive.

My teeth were chattering as I forced my legs out of the bed and onto the

floor. I reached for the light switch and pressed it.

I spent the remainder of the night pacing the floor, my body bathed in cold perspiration.

FROM that moment my body was, apparently, under the control of that fearful thing from beyond the veil. Yet I never saw him again. But I felt him—felt his presence constantly with me. I grew fearful of myself, sensing his deadly hatred of me. A hundred times I caught myself in the act of killing myself. Caught myself, I say. Let me explain: My hands refused to do the bidding of my brain. They seemed endowed with an intelligence alien to mine. I threw my gun into the furnace when I woke up one night in the nick of time, finding my hands groping for it beneath the pillow. On another occasion my razor slipped; I jerked it away from my windpipe, knowing that I had been in the act of slitting my own throat. I allowed my beard to grow.

My hands had assumed the mastery of my body, doing things constantly that were beyond my control. I grew morose and moody. Luckily I was possessed of ample means and my wants were few. Packing a few belongings into a trailer, I locked up my rooms, filled my car with books and drove to a little place I owned a hundred miles from the city. It was a hunting-shack surrounded by a few acres of ground in the midst, almost, of a wilderness. Here, my dog as my only companion, I intended fighting my battle with myself.

Before leaving, I wrote a letter to the woman I loved, breaking off our engagement. I gave no reason. Nor did I tell her where I was going. She replied, demanding an explanation of my strange conduct. I gave her none.

And so, in the wilderness, the nearest neighbor miles away, I took up my residence. Fearful of having a sharp-edged weapon of any kind, I allowed my hair and beard to grow. It became long and matted. I was but a shadow of what I had once been.

Even my dog sensed the change in me. In the daytime he was as he had always been. But at night, possessed of that strange sixth sense that is the birthright of the lower animals, he seemed to see beyond me—through me, if you will—catching glimpses of the hellish being that was always by my side. There is no other explanation for his conduct. Night after night he walked around me stiff-legged, his tail between his legs, his fangs bared, his hair bristling, a low, menacing growl issuing from his throat. Once I tried to pet him. He snapped at my hands. I never tried to pet him again at night. Yet in the sunlight he fawned on me, allowing me to caress him at will.

UP TO this time I was fearful only of myself. But, after a few weeks in the hunting-shack, something happened which gave me new cause for alarm. I have said, I believe, that the community in which the shack was located was sparsely settled, the houses miles apart. Livestock roamed at will through the dark forests. One of the nearest neighbors, passing my place one day, stopped long enough to tell me of the death of one of his calves.

"Not a mark of any kind on it," he said. "I found it back yonder a mile or two. Its mouth was open, its tongue lolling out, just as if it had choked to death. And its eyes were wide open and bulging, too."

For the moment I thought nothing of it. But other farmers passing by during the days that followed told me of similar

deaths among their livestock. Calves, sheep, a hog or two. In every instance death had resulted from the same cause. The open mouth and protruding eyes told their story only too well. Some monster was roaming the countryside—some fiend who killed for the love of killing.

And still I did not attribute this epidemic of death to myself. My nights were dreamless. I seemed to have got used to the strange thing that was haunting me, even though I spent my waking hours in worry. I was a mass of nerves. In spite of my excellent nights, I woke up each morning tired and weary. I put this down to my nervousness during the day.

Then, one morning, I awoke to find my dog lying by the side of the bed, dead. His mouth was open, his eyes protruding. He had been choked to death. Realization swept over me. I proved the case against myself. The door and windows, all locked on the inside, had not been disturbed.

My tired feeling each morning was plain to me now. I had killed the dog just as I had killed the calves and sheep that roamed the countryside. I was the monster for whom the farmers were searching.

Instead of sleeping nights, I was in some sort of hypnotic trance brought on by the thing to which I was attached. My brain was master of my body by day, but by night my hands ruled my brain. I was spending the hours of the night wandering through the darkness in search of victims. I was a killer—a maniac.

What was I to do? A thousand plans went through my head while I buried my poor dog a little distance from the house. I rejected all of them. I should have given myself up—asked the officials to lock me up as a homicidal maniac. But something kept me from it just as I was kept from killing myself. I tried a dozen times to take my own life, but my hand was stayed each time. I could not understand it; only a few weeks before I was struggling with myself in an effort to avoid doing what I was now attempting to do.

How was I to know that the foul fiend was keeping me alive in order to achieve a more subtle, more diabolical revenge?

When I buried myself in the barren country I had, so far as possible, cut myself off from civilization. I read but little; my few books sufficed me. Newspapers never passed my threshold—why, I do not know. But I had never been a great reader of the daily press; now it seemed as if I had taken a sudden aversion to every paper. I know now that it was the strange being that had taken possession of me—that he, hating the Fourth Estate for its exposure of him, had implanted this dislike in me. Thus it was that I did not know of the holocaust of death that was sweeping over the surrounding territory. Women, girls, innocent children were being killed—throttled to death by some hellish monster, as had been the calves and sheep. A score of detectives and county officials were scouring the country everywhere within a radius of a hundred miles. And yet I went peacefully on to my doom, knowing nothing of all this.

I took precautions, as I thought. I devised all sorts of little tricks to guard me against myself—little gadgets to wake me up in case I attempted to release myself from the complicated system of locks that I had constructed to keep me from wandering about in the strange amnesia which came with the setting of the sun. I did not realize that the cunning brain of the devilish thing from beyond the veil was clever enough to have me replace the traps before I lay down after one of my nocturnal excursions.

THEN, one morning, I woke up more weary than usual. I felt dull and lethargic. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. The side of my face was bruised and blackened as if from a blow.

And still I did not realize the truth. I imagined that I had hurt myself while asleep.

It was a few days later that, wandering through the woods a short distance from my humble shack—I had started for a neighboring brook after a mess of trout and had, for some reason, switched off—I chanced across a week-old paper, evidently dropped by some fisherman who had had it wrapped about his lunch. I was about to pass it by when a vagrant breath of wind blew it open. A picture stared up at me.

I leaped back with a shriek of terror.

It was the face of the handless monster who was now my master.

I seized the paper, my eyes searching the glaring headlines that covered half of the front page:

DOES DEAD MAN LIVE AGAIN?

Is Notorious London Throttler Alive in This Country?

Fingerprints of Bill Duxton, Newcastle Street Slayer, Found on Vanity Case of Woman Slain Last Night

Thought Killed During World War

The paper told of the series of crimes that had shocked the entire civilized world. Women and children had been throttled—killed in cold blood by a fiend—a monster. Night after night for two weeks he had swooped down on villages and farmhouses, selecting his victims with maniacal cunning, never leaving a clue—until now.

The night before the issuance of the paper a crime of unusual atrocity had been committed. A young girl driving down a lonely country road had evidently run out of gas. At least, so the officials had deduced when the car was found a quarter of a mile from the scene of the crime, the tank empty. A stranger in that part of the country, she had apparently started out to walk to the nearest habitation for help when overtaken by the throttler.

That she had battled desperately for her life was demonstrated by the trampled grass. Her mesh bag, open, its contents strewn about, was found beside the bruised and battered body, her dead fingers still gripping the chain. Upon the vanity case beside the open bag were the prints of a man's fingers.

The officers had reconstructed the crime thus: The girl had been carrying the bag, woman-like, when attacked. She had swung it at her attacker. The blow had evidently forced the bag open. The monster, seizing it to jerk it away from the girl, had accidentally touched the vanity case, leaving his fingerprints on the clear, smooth surface.

The case had been rushed to the city and the fingerprints developed. While comparing them with the files of the police department someone had accidentally stumbled upon a set of prints, yellow with age, of one Bill Duxton, a monster who had, a decade earlier, startled London with the ferocity of his crimes. The two sets of prints were identical.

But Bill Duxton had disappeared at the beginning of the World War. It was believed that he had joined one of the armies fighting in France and had been killed somewhere at the front.

The enterprising press photographer had taken pictures, both of the prints on the vanity case and those of Bill Duxton. They were displayed, side by side, on the front page beneath his picture.

I had known fear before. But now I was to understand its full meaning. It was a chill autumn day, yet the beads of

perspiration gathered across my forehead and trickled down into my eyes.

For there was another picture on an inside page—the picture of the murdered girl. Even in death I recognized her. She was Joan Beresford, the woman I loved.

I stuffed the paper in my pocket and ran back to my lonely shack like a thing accursed.

The bruise on the side of my face was explained now. She had struck me there with the mesh bag. Like a man in a dream, I went to the table I used for a desk and, pressing my fingers against the ink-pad, imprinted them upon a smooth piece of white paper. Then I compared them with those in the news sheet.

All three sets were identical. Bill Duxton, the notorious London throttler, lived again in me. He was the man who, dying, had been hastened to his doom by the removal of his hands. A part of his flesh had been grafted to my flesh. He was a part of me.

A surge of manhood swept over me. My flivver was standing in the yard. Hastening out to it, I measured the gas. The tank was almost empty—mute evidence of my foul deed; for the place where the crime had been committed was forty miles away. I climbed under the wheel and stepped on the starter. My mind was made up. I would go to the city and give myself up.

I looked at my wrist watch, knowing that I must hurry. It should be dark within an hour or two. And with the coming of darkness Bill Duxton would again be my master. And Bill Duxton, I knew, would not let me carry out my plans. The scourge of death must cease.

It was growing dark when I turned off from the side road onto the pavement. Already I felt an almost overpowering desire to turn back. Bill Duxton was asserting himself. It was with difficulty that I kept my hands—*his hands*—from twisting the wheel and turning the car around. I pressed my foot a bit harder on the gas. . . .

There was a crash. Then oblivion.

I AWOKE in a hospital. It was nighttime, for the lights were on. A nurse was bending over me, removing my blood-soaked clothing. She gave a sudden gasp at sight of the innumerable scars upon my torso.

"For heaven's sake, look at this man, Doctor Ernest!" she exclaimed. "His entire body is a mass of scars. And his arms! Merciful heavens! The color of the hair upon them is different . . . a scar runs completely around them. . . . It is as if the hands had been cut off and new ones fastened on!"

I heard an exclamation in a masculine voice. Then a man in surgical garb bent over me.

"The same! The same!" he ejaculated. "I'd know that operation in a million. It's the man I was telling you about in class, Miss Miller. . . . The grafting operation I performed in France. I often wondered if he lived."

I gathered my strength. It was Bill Duxton and I working together now. My hands—Duxton's hands—leaped upward and seized him by his skinny throat. He tried to pull away. I clung to him as he dragged my battered body from the operating-table. He dropped to the floor, his eyes bulging, his tongue protruding from his mouth.

The nurse ran screaming from the room. A moment later they were upon me. They tried to pull me off, but I hung on relentlessly, putting every ounce of strength I possessed into that throttling grip.

"For Joan!" I gasped, digging my blunt fingers deeper into his gullet.

When they pried me loose, he was dead.

"Traitress! What game are you playing?"

Jewels of Gwahlur

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

The tale of a weird, jungle-hidden palace and a strange weird people—and the marvelous sacred jewels that were known as the Teeth of Gwahlur.

1. *Paths of Intrigue*

THE cliffs rose sheer from the jungle, towering ramparts of stone that glinted jade-blue and dull crimson in the rising sun, and curved away and away to east and west above the waving emerald ocean of fronds and leaves. It looked insurmountable, that giant palisade with its sheer curtains of solid rock in which bits of quartz winked dazzlingly in the sunlight. But

the man who was working his tedious way upward was already half-way to the top.

He came of a race of hillmen, accustomed to scaling forbidding crags, and he was a man of unusual strength and agility. His only garment was a pair of short red silk breeks, and his sandals were slung to his back, out of his way, as were his sword and dagger.

The man was powerfully built, supple as a panther. His skin was bronzed by the sun, his square-cut black mane confined by a silver band about his temples. His iron muscles, quick eyes and sure feet served him well here, for it was a climb to test these qualities to the utmost. A hundred and fifty feet below him waved the jungle. An equal distance above him the rim of the cliffs was etched against the morning sky.

He labored like one driven by the necessity of haste; yet he was forced to move at a snail's pace, clinging like a fly on a wall. His groping hands and feet found niches and knobs, precarious holds at best, and sometimes he virtually hung by his finger nails. Yet upward he went, clawing, squirming, fighting for every foot. At times he paused to rest his aching muscles, and, shaking the sweat out of his eyes, twisted his head to stare searchingly out over the jungle, combing the green expanse for any trace of human life or motion.

Now the summit was not far above him, and he observed, only a few feet above his head, a break in the sheer stone of the cliff. An instant later he had reached it—a small cavern, just below the edge of the rim. As his head rose above the lip of its floor, he grunted. He clung there, his elbows hooked over the lip. The cave was so tiny that it was little more than a niche cut in the stone, but it held an occupant. A shriveled brown mummy, cross-legged, arms folded on the withered breast upon which the shrunken head was sunk, sat in the little cavern. The limbs were bound in place with rawhide thongs which had become mere rotted wisps. If the form had ever been clothed, the ravages of time had long ago reduced the garments to dust. But thrust between the crossed arms and the shrunken breast there was a roll of parchment, yellowed with age to the color of old ivory.

The climber stretched forth a long arm and wrenched away this cylinder. Without investigation he thrust it into his girdle and hauled himself up until he was standing in the opening of the niche. A spring upward and he caught the rim of the cliffs and pulled himself up and over almost with the same motion.

There he halted, panting, and stared downward.

It was like looking into the interior of a vast bowl, rimmed by a circular stone wall. The floor of the bowl was covered with trees and denser vegetation, though nowhere did the growth duplicate the jungle denseness of the outer forest. The cliffs marched around it without a break and of uniform height. It was a freak of nature, not to be paralleled, perhaps, in the whole world: a vast natural amphitheater, a circular bit of forested plain, three or four miles in diameter, cut off from the rest of the world, and confined within the ring of those palisaded cliffs.

But the man on the cliffs did not devote his thoughts to marveling at the topographical phenomenon. With tense eagerness he searched the tree-tops below him, and exhaled a gusty sigh when he caught the glint of marble domes amidst the twinkling green. It was no myth, then; below him lay the fabulous and deserted palace of Alkmeenon.

Conan the Cimmerian, late of the Barachan Isles, of the Black Coast, and of

many other climes where life ran wild, had come to the kingdom of Keshan following the lure of a fabled treasure that outshone the hoard of the Turanian kings.

KESHAN was a barbaric kingdom lying in the eastern hinterlands of Kush where the broad grasslands merge with the forests that roll up from the south. The people were a mixed race, a dusky nobility ruling a population that was largely pure negro. The rulers—princes and high priests—claimed descent from a white race which, in a mythical age, had ruled a kingdom whose capital city was Alkmeenon. Conflicting legends sought to explain the reason for that race's eventual downfall, and the abandonment of the city by the survivors. Equally nebulous were the tales of the Teeth of Gwahlur, the treasure of Alkmeenon. But these misty legends had been enough to bring Conan to Keshan, over vast distances of plain, river-laced jungle, and mountains.

He had found Keshan, which in itself was considered mythical by many northern and western nations, and he had heard enough to confirm the rumors of the treasure that men called the Teeth of Gwahlur. But its hiding-place he could not learn, and he was confronted with the necessity of explaining his presence in Keshan. Unattached strangers were not welcome there.

But he was not nonplussed. With cool assurance he made his offer to the stately, plumed, suspicious grandees of the barbarically magnificent court. He was a professional fighting-man. In search of employment (he said) he had come to Keshan. For a price he would train the armies of Keshan and lead them against Punt, their hereditary enemy, whose recent successes in the field had aroused the fury of Keshan's irascible king.

This proposition was not so audacious as it might seem. Conan's fame had preceded him, even into distant Keshan; his exploits as a chief of the black corsairs, those wolves of the southern coasts, had made his name known, admired and feared throughout the black kingdoms. He did not refuse tests devised by the dusky lords. Skirmishes along the borders were incessant, affording the Cimmerian plenty of opportunities to demonstrate his ability at hand-to-hand fighting. His reckless ferocity impressed the lords of Keshan, already aware of his reputation as a leader of men, and the prospects seemed favorable. All Conan secretly desired was employment to give him legitimate excuse for remaining in Keshan long enough to locate the hiding-place of the Teeth of Gwahlur. Then there came an interruption. Thutmekri came to Keshan at the head of an embassy from Zembabwei.

Thutmekri was a Stygian, an adventurer and a rogue whose wits had recommended him to the twin kings of the great hybrid trading kingdom which lay many days' march to the east. He and the Cimmerian knew each other of old, and without love. Thutmekri likewise had a proposition to make to the king of Keshan, and it also concerned the conquest of Punt—which kingdom, incidentally, lying east of Keshan, had recently expelled the Zembabwan traders and burned their fortresses.

His offer outweighed even the prestige of Conan. He pledged himself to invade Punt from the east with a host of black spearmen, Shemitish archers, and mercenary swordsmen, and to aid the king of Keshan to annex the hostile kingdom. The benevolent kings of Zembabwei desired only a monopoly of the trade of Keshan and her tributaries—and, as a pledge of good faith, some of the Teeth of Gwahlur. These would be put to no base usage, Thutmekri hastened to explain to the suspicious chieftains; they

would be placed in the temple of Zembabwei beside the squat gold idols of Dagon and Derketo, sacred guests in the holy shrine of the kingdom, to seal the covenant between Keshan and Zembabwei. This statement brought a savage grin to Conan's hard lips.

The Cimmerian made no attempt to match wits and intrigue with Thutmekri and his Shemitish partner, Zargheba. He knew that if Thutmekri won his point, he would insist on the instant banishment of his rival. There was but one thing for Conan to do: find the jewels before the king of Keshan made up his mind, and flee with them. But by this time he was certain that they were not hidden in Keshia, the royal city, which was a swarm of thatched huts crowding about a mud wall that enclosed a palace of stone and mud and bamboo.

While he fumed with nervous impatience, the high priest Gorulga announced that before any decision could be reached, the will of the gods must be ascertained concerning the proposed alliance with Zembabwei and the pledge of objects long held holy and inviolate. The oracle of Alkmeenon must be consulted.

This was an awesome thing, and it caused tongues to wag excitedly in palace and bee-hive hut. Not for a century had the priests visited the silent city. The oracle, men said, was the Princess Yelaya, the last ruler of Alkmeenon, who had died in the full bloom of her youth and beauty, and whose body had miraculously remained unblemished throughout the ages. Of old, priests had made their way into the haunted city, and she had taught them wisdom. The last priest to seek the oracle had been a wicked man, who had sought to steal for himself the curiously cut jewels that men called the Teeth of Gwahlur. But some doom had come upon him in the deserted palace, from which his acolytes, fleeing, had told tales of horror that had for a hundred years frightened the priests from the city and the oracle.

But Gorulga, the present high priest, as one confident in his knowledge of his own integrity, announced that he would go with a handful of followers to revive the ancient custom. And in the excitement tongues buzzed indiscreetly, and Conan caught the clue for which he had sought for weeks—the overheard whisper of a lesser priest that sent the Cimmerian stealing out of Keshia the night before the dawn when the priests were to start.

RIDING hard as he dared for a night and a day and a night, he came in the early dawn to the cliffs of Alkmeenon, which stood in the southwestern corner of the kingdom, amidst uninhabited jungle which was taboo to common men. None but the priests dared approach the haunted vale within a distance of many miles. And not even a priest had entered Alkmeenon for a hundred years.

No man had ever climbed these cliffs, legends said, and none but the priests knew the secret entrance into the valley. Conan did not waste time looking for it. Steeps that balked these black people, horsemen and dwellers of plain and level forest, were not impossible for a man born in the rugged hills of Cimmeria.

Now on the summit of the cliffs he looked down into the circular valley and wondered what plague, war or superstition had driven the members of that ancient white race forth from their stronghold to mingle with and be absorbed by the black tribes that hemmed them in.

This valley had been their citadel. There the palace stood, and there only the royal family and their court dwelt. The real city stood outside the cliffs. Those waving masses of green jungle vegetation hid its ruins. But the domes that glistened in the leaves below him

were the unbroken pinnacles of the royal palace of Alkmeenon which had defied the corroding ages.

Swinging a leg over the rim he went down swiftly. The inner side of the cliffs was more broken, not quite so sheer. In less than half the time it had taken him to ascend the outer side, he dropped to the swarded valley floor.

With one hand on his sword, he looked alertly about him. There was no reason to suppose men lied when they said that Alkmeenon was empty and deserted, haunted only by the ghosts of the dead past. But it was Conan's nature to be suspicious and wary. The silence was primordial; not even a leaf quivered on a branch. When he bent to peer under the trees, he saw nothing but the marching rows of trunks, receding and receding into the blue gloom of the deep woods.

Nevertheless he went warily, sword in hand, his restless eyes combing the shadows from side to side, his springy tread making no sound on the sward. All about him he saw signs of an ancient civilization; marble fountains, voiceless and crumbling, stood in circles of slender trees whose patterns were too symmetrical to have been a chance of nature. Forest-growth and underbrush had invaded the evenly planned groves, but their outlines were still visible. Broad pavements ran away under the trees, broken, and with grass growing through the wide cracks. He glimpsed walls with ornamental copings, lattices of carven stone that might once have served as the walls of pleasure pavilions.

Ahead of him, through the trees, the domes gleamed and the bulk of the structure supporting them became more apparent as he advanced. Presently, pushing through a screen of vine-tangled branches, he came into a comparatively open space where the trees straggled, unencumbered by undergrowth, and saw before him the wide, pillared portico of the palace.

As he mounted the broad marble steps, he noted that the building was in far better state of preservation than the lesser structures he had glimpsed. The thick walls and massive pillars seemed too powerful to crumble before the assault of time and the elements. The same enchanted quiet brooded over all. The catlike pad of his sandaled feet seemed startlingly loud in the stillness.

Somewhere in this palace lay the effigy or image which had in times past served as oracle for the priests of Keshan. And somewhere in the palace, unless that indiscreet priest had babbled a lie, was hidden the treasure of the forgotten kings of Alkmeenon.

CONAN passed into a broad, lofty hall, lined with tall columns, between which arches gaped, their doors long rotted away. He traversed this in a twilight dimness, and at the other end passed through great double-valved bronze doors which stood partly open, as they might have stood for centuries. He emerged into a vast domed chamber which must have served as audience hall for the kings of Alkmeenon.

It was octagonal in shape, and the great dome up to which the lofty ceiling curved obviously was cunningly pierced, for the chamber was much better lighted than the hall which led to it. At the farther side of the great room there rose a dais with broad lapis-lazuli steps leading up to it, and on that dais there stood a massive chair with ornate arms and a high back which once doubtless supported a cloth-of-gold canopy. Conan grunted explosively and his eyes lit. The golden throne of Alkmeenon, named in immemorial legendry! He weighed it with a practised eye. It represented a fortune in

itself, if he were but able to bear it away. Its richness fired his imagination concerning the treasure itself, and made him burn with eagerness. His fingers itched to plunge among the gems he had heard described by story-tellers in the market squares of Keshia, who repeated tales handed down from mouth to mouth through the centuries—jewels not to be duplicated in the world, rubies, emeralds, diamonds, bloodstones, opals, sapphires, the loot of the ancient world.

He had expected to find the oracle-effigy seated on the throne, but since it was not, it was probably placed in some other part of the palace, if, indeed, such a thing really existed. But since he had turned his face toward Keshan, so many myths had proved to be realities that he did not doubt that he would find some kind of image or god.

Behind the throne there was a narrow arched doorway which doubtless had been masked by hangings in the days of Alkmeenon's life. He glanced through it and saw that it let into an alcove, empty, and with a narrow corridor leading off from it at right angles. Turning away from it, he spied another arch to the left of the dais, and it, unlike the others, was furnished with a door. Nor was it any common door. The portal was of the same rich metal as the throne, and carved with many curious arabesques.

At his touch it swung open so readily that its hinges might recently have been oiled. Inside he halted, staring.

He was in a square chamber of no great dimensions, whose marble walls rose to an ornate ceiling, inlaid with gold. Gold friezes ran about the base and the top of the walls, and there was no door other than the one through which he had entered. But he noted these details mechanically. His whole attention was centered on the shape which lay on an ivory dais before him.

He had expected an image, probably carved with the skill of a forgotten art. But no art could mimic the perfection of the figure that lay before him.

It was no effigy of stone or metal or ivory. It was the actual body of a woman, and by what dark art the ancients had preserved that form unblemished for so many ages Conan could not even guess. The very garments she wore were intact —and Conan scowled at that, a vague uneasiness stirring at the back of his mind. The arts that preserved the body should not have affected the garments. Yet there they were—gold breast-plates set with concentric circles of small gems, gilded sandals, and a short silken skirt upheld by a jeweled girdle. Neither cloth nor metal showed any signs of decay.

Yelaya was coldly beautiful, even in death. Her body was like alabaster, slender yet voluptuous; a great crimson jewel gleamed against the darkly piled foam of her hair.

Conan stood frowning down at her, and then tapped the dais with his sword. Possibilities of a hollow containing the treasure occurred to him, but the dais rang solid. He turned and paced the chamber in some indecision. Where should he search first, in the limited time at his disposal? The priest he had overheard babbling to a courtezan had said the treasure was hidden in the palace. But that included a space of considerable vastness. He wondered if he should hide himself until the priests had come and gone, and then renew the search. But there was a strong chance that they might take the jewels with them when they returned to Keshia. For he was convinced that Thutmekri had corrupted Gorulga.

Conan could predict Thutmekri's plans, from his knowlege of the man. He knew that it had been Thutmekri who had proposed the conquest of Punt to the kings of Zembabwei, which conquest was but

one move toward their real goal—the capture of the Teeth of Gwahlur. Those wary kings would demand proof that the treasure really existed before they made any move. The jewels Thutmekri asked as a pledge would furnish that proof.

With positive evidence of the treasure's reality, the kings of Zembabwei would move. Punt would be invaded simultaneously from the east and the west, but the Zembabwans would see to it that the Keshani did most of the fighting, and then, when both Punt and Keshan were exhausted from the struggle, the Zembabwans would crush both races, loot Keshan and take the treasure by force, if they had to destroy every building and torture every living human in the kingdom.

But there was always another possibility: if Thutmekri could get his hands on the hoard, it would be characteristic of the man to cheat his employers, steal the jewels for himself and decamp, leaving the Zembabwan emissaries holding the sack.

Conan believed that this consulting of the oracle was but a ruse to persuade the king of Keshan to accede to Thutmekri's wishes—for he never for a moment doubted that Gorulga was as subtle and devious as all the rest mixed up in this grand swindle. Conan had not approached the high priest himself, because in the game of bribery he would have no chance against Thutmekri, and to attempt it would be to play directly into the Stygian's hands. Gorulga could denounce the Cimmerian to the people, establish a reputation for integrity, and rid Thutmekri of his rival at one stroke. He wondered how Thutmekri had corrupted the high priest, and just what could be offered as a bribe to a man who had the greatest treasure in the world under his fingers.

At any rate he was sure that the oracle would be made to say that the gods willed it that Keshan should follow Thutmekri's wishes, and he was sure, too, that it would drop a few pointed remarks concerning himself. After that Keshia would be too hot for the Cimmerian, nor had Conan had any intention of returning when he rode away in the night.

THE oracle chamber held no clue for him. He went forth into the great throne-room and laid his hands on the throne. It was heavy, but he could tilt it up. The floor beneath, a thick marble dais, was solid. Again he sought the alcove. His mind clung to a secret crypt near the oracle. Painstakingly he began to tap along the walls, and presently his taps rang hollow at a spot opposite the mouth of the narrow corridor. Looking more closely he saw that the crack between the marble panel at that point and the next was wider than usual. He inserted a dagger-point and pried.

Silently the panel swung open, revealing a niche in the wall, but nothing else. He swore feelingly. The aperture was empty, and it did not look as if it had ever served as a crypt for treasure. Leaning into the niche he saw a system of tiny holes in the wall, about on a level with a man's mouth. He peered through, and grunted understandingly. That was the wall that formed the partition between the alcove and the oracle chamber. Those holes had not been visible in the chamber. Conan grinned. This explained the mystery of the oracle, but it was a bit cruder than he had expected. Gorulga would plant either himself or some trusted minion in that niche, to talk through the holes, and the credulous acolytes, black men all, would accept it as the veritable voice of Yelaya.

Remembering something, the Cimmerian drew forth the roll of parchment he had taken from the mummy and unrolled it carefully, as it seemed ready to fall to

pieces with age. He scowled over the dim characters with which it was covered. In his roaming about the world the giant adventurer had picked up a wide smattering of knowledge, particularly including the speaking and reading of many alien tongues. Many a sheltered scholar would have been astonished at the Cimmerian's linguistic abilities, for he had experienced many adventures where knowledge of a strange language had meant the difference between life and death.

These characters were puzzling, at once familiar and unintelligible, and presently he discovered the reason. They were the characters of archaic Pelishtim, which possessed many points of difference from the modern script, with which he was familiar, and which, three centuries ago, had been modified by conquest by a nomad tribe. This older, purer script baffled him. He made out a recurrent phrase, however, which he recognized as a proper name: Bit Yakin. He gathered that it was the name of the writer.

Scowling, his lips unconsciously moving as he struggled with the task, he blundered through the manuscript, finding much of it untranslatable and most of the rest of it obscure.

He gathered that the writer, the mysterious Bît-Yakin, had come from afar with his servants, and entered the valley of Alkmeenon. Much that followed was meaningless, interspersed as it was with unfamiliar phrases and characters. Such as he could translate seemed to indicate the passing of a very long period of time. The name of Yelaya was repeated frequently, and toward the last part of the manuscript it became apparent that Bît-Yakin knew that death was upon him. With a slight start Conan realized that the mummy in the cavern must be the remains of the writer of the manuscript, the mysterious Pelishtim, Bît-Yakin. The man had died, as he had prophesied, and his servants, obviously, had placed him in that open crypt, high up on the cliffs, according to his instructions before his death.

It was strange that Bît-Yakin was not mentioned in any of the legends of Alkmeenon. Obviously he had come to the valley after it had been deserted by the original inhabitants—the manuscript indicated as much—but it seemed peculiar that the priests who came in the old days to consult the oracle had not seen the man or his servants. Conan felt sure that the mummy and this parchment were more than a hundred years old. Bît-Yakin had dwelt in the valley when the priests came of old to bow before dead Yelaya. Yet concerning him the legends were silent, telling only of a deserted city, haunted only by the dead.

Why had the man dwelt in this desolate spot, and to what unknown destination had his servants departed after disposing of their master's corpse?

CONAN shrugged his shoulders and thrust the parchment back into his girdle—he started violently, the skin on the backs of his hands tingling. Startlingly, shockingly in the slumberous stillness, there had boomed the deep strident clangor of a great gong!

He wheeled, crouching like a great cat, sword in hand, glaring down the narrow corridor from which the sound had seemed to come. Had the priests of Keshia arrived? This was improbable, he knew; they would not have had time to reach the valley. But that gong was indisputable evidence of human presence.

Conan was basically a direct-actionist. Such subtlety as he possessed had been acquired through contact with the more devious races. When taken off guard by some unexpected occurrence, he reverted instinctively to type. So now, instead of

hiding or slipping away in the opposite direction as the average man might have done, he ran straight down the corridor in the direction of the sound. His sandals made no more sound than the pads of a panther would have made; his eyes were slits, his lips unconsciously asnarl. Panic had momentarily touched his soul at the shock of that unexpected reverberation, and the red rage of the primitive that is wakened by threat of peril, always lurked close to the surface of the Cimmerian.

He emerged presently from the winding corridor into a small open court. Something glinting in the sun caught his eye. It was the gong, a great gold disk, hanging from a gold arm extending from the crumbling wall. A brass mallet lay near, but there was no sound or sight of humanity. The surrounding arches gaped emptily. Conan crouched inside the doorway for what seemed a long time. There was no sound or movement throughout the great palace. His patience exhausted at last, he glided around the curve of the court, peering into the arches, ready to leap either way like a flash of light, or to strike right or left as a cobra strikes.

He reached the gong, stared into the arch nearest it. He saw only a dim chamber, littered with the debris of decay. Beneath the gong the polished marble flags showed no footprint, but there was a scent in the air—a faintly fetid odor he could not classify; his nostrils dilated like those of a wild beast as he sought in vain to identify it.

He turned toward the arch—with appalling suddenness the seemingly solid flags splintered and gave way under his feet. Even as he fell he spread wide his arms and caught the edges of the aperture that gaped beneath him. The edges crumbled off under his clutching fingers. Down into utter darkness he shot, into black icy water that gripped him and whirled him away with breathless speed.

2. *A Goddess Awakens*

The Cimmerian at first made no attempt to fight the current that was sweeping him through lightless night. He kept himself afloat, gripping between his teeth the sword, which he had not relinquished, even in his fall, and did not even seek to guess to what doom he was being borne. But suddenly a beam of light lanced the darkness ahead of him. He saw the surging, seething black surface of the water, in turmoil as if disturbed by some monster of the deep, and he saw the sheer stone walls of the channel curved up to a vault overhead. On each side ran a narrow ledge, just below the arching roof, but they were far out of his reach. At one point this roof had been broken, probably fallen in, and the light was streaming through the aperture. Beyond that shaft of light was utter blackness, and panic assailed the Cimmerian as he saw he would be swept on past that spot of light, and into the unknown blackness again.

Then he saw something else: bronze ladders extended from the ledges to the water's surface at regular intervals, and there was one just ahead of him. Instantly he struck out for it, fighting the current that would have held him to the middle of the stream. It dragged at him as with tangible, animate slimy hands, but he buffeted the rushing surge with the strength of desperation and drew closer and closer inshore, fighting furiously for every inch. Now he was even with the ladder and with a fierce, gasping plunge he gripped the bottom rung and hung on, breathless.

A few seconds later he struggled up out of the seething water, trusting his weight dubiously to the corroded rungs

They sagged and bent, but they held, and he clambered up onto the narrow ledge which ran along the wall scarcely a man's length below the curving roof. The tall Cimmerian was forced to bend his head as he stood up. A heavy bronze door showed in the stone at a point even with the head of the ladder, but it did not give to Conan's efforts. He transferred his sword from his teeth to its scabbard, spitting blood—for the edge had cut his lips in that fierce fight with the river—and turned his attention to the broken roof.

He could reach his arms up through the crevice and grip the edge, and careful testing told him it would bear his weight. An instant later he had drawn himself up through the hole, and found himself in a wide chamber, in a state of extreme disrepair. Most of the roof had fallen in, as well as a great section of the floor, which was laid over the vault of a subterranean river. Broken arches opened into other chambers and corridors, and Conan believed he was still in the great palace. He wondered uneasily how many chambers in that palace had underground water directly under them, and when the ancient flags or tiles might give way again and precipitate him back into the current from which he had just crawled.

And he wondered just how much of an accident that fall had been. Had those rotten flags simply chanced to give way beneath his weight, or was there a more sinister explanation? One thing at least was obvious: he was not the only living thing in that palace. That gong had not sounded of its own accord, whether the noise had been meant to lure him to his death, or not. The silence of the palace became suddenly sinister, fraught with crawling menace.

Could it be someone on the same mission as himself? A sudden thought occurred to him, at the memory of the mysterious Bît-Yakin. Was it not possible that this man had found the Teeth of Gwahlur in his long residence in Alkmeenon—that his servants had taken them with them when they departed? The possibility that he might be following a will-of-the-wisp infuriated the Cimmerian.

Choosing a corridor which he believed led back toward the part of the palace he had first entered, he hurried along it, stepping gingerly as he thought of that black river that seethed and foamed somewhere below his feet.

His speculations recurrently revolved about the oracle chamber and its cryptic occupant. Somewhere in that vicinity must be the clue to the mystery of the treasure, if indeed it still remained in its immemorial hiding-place.

The great palace lay silent as ever, disturbed only by the swift passing of his sandaled feet. The chambers and halls he traversed were crumbling into ruin, but as he advanced the ravages of decay became less apparent. He wondered briefly for what purpose the ladders had been suspended from the ledges over the subterranean river, but dismissed the matter with a shrug. He was little interested in speculating over unremunerative problems of antiquity.

He was not sure just where the oracle chamber lay, from where he was, but presently he emerged into a corridor which led back into the great throne-room under one of the arches. He had reached a decision; it was useless for him to wander aimlessly about the palace, seeking the hoard. He would conceal himself somewhere here, wait until the Keshani priests came, and then, after they had gone through the farce of consulting the oracle, he would follow them to the hiding-place of the gems, to which he was certain they would go. Perhaps they would take only a few of the jewels with

them. He would content himself with the rest.

DRAWN by a morbid fascination, he re-entered the oracle chamber and stared down again at the motionless figure of the princess who was worshipped as a goddess, entranced by her frigid beauty. What cryptic secret was locked in that marvelously molded form?

He started violently. The breath sucked through his teeth, the short hairs prickled at the back of his scalp. The body still lay as he had first seen it, silent, motionless, in breast-plates of jeweled gold, gilded sandals and silken skirt. But now there was a subtle difference. The lissom limbs were not rigid, a peach-bloom touched the cheeks, the lips were red——

With a panicky curse Conan ripped out his sword.

"Crom! She's alive!"

At his words the long dark lashes lifted; the eyes opened and gazed up at him inscrutably, dark, lustrous, mystical. He glared in frozen speechlessness.

She sat up with a supple ease, still holding his ensorcelled stare.

He licked his dry lips and found voice.

"You—are—are you Yelaya?" he stammered.

"I am Yelaya!" The voice was rich and musical, and he stared with new wonder. "Do not fear. I will not harm you if you do my bidding."

"How can a dead woman come to life after all these centuries?" he demanded, as if skeptical of what his senses told him. A curious gleam was beginning to smolder in his eyes.

She lifted her arms in a mystical gesture.

"I am a goddess. A thousand years ago there descended upon me the curse of the greater gods, the gods of darkness beyond the borders of light. The mortal in me died; the goddess in me could never die. Here I have lain for so many centuries, to awaken each night at sunset and hold my court as of yore, with specters drawn from the shadows of the past. Man, if you would not view that which will blast your soul for ever, get hence quickly! I command you! Go!" The voice became imperious, and her slender arm lifted and pointed.

Conan, his eyes burning slits, slowly sheathed his sword, but he did not obey her order. He stepped closer, as if impelled by a powerful fascination—without the slightest warning he grabbed her up in a bear-like grasp. She screamed a very ungoddess-like scream, and there was a sound of ripping silk, as with one ruthless wrench he tore off her skirt.

"Goddess! Ha!" His bark was full of angry contempt. He ignored the frantic writhings of his captive. "I thought it was strange that a princess of Aikmeenon would speak with a Corinthian accent! As soon as I'd gathered my wits I knew I'd seen you somewhere. You're Muriela, Zargheba's Corinthian dancing-girl. This crescent-shaped birthmark on your hip proves it. I saw it once when Zargheba was whipping you. Goddess! Bah!" He smacked the betraying hip contemptuously and resoundingly with his open hand, and the girl yelped piteously.

All her imperiousness had gone out of her. She was no longer a mystical figure of antiquity, but a terrified and humiliated dancing-girl, such as can be bought at almost any Shemitish market-place. She lifted up her voice and wept unashamedly. Her captor glared down at her with angry triumph.

"Goddess! Ha! So you were one of the veiled women Zargheba brought to Keshia with him. Did you think you could fool me, you little idiot? A year ago I saw you in Akbitana with that swine, Zargheba, and I don't forget faces —or women's figures. I think I'll——"

Squirming about in his grasp she threw her slender arms about his massive neck in an abandon of terror; tears coursed down her cheeks, and her sobs quivered with a note of hysteria.

"Oh, please don't hurt me! Don't! I had to do it! Zargheba brought me here to act as the oracle!"

"Why, you sacrilegious little hussy!" rumbled Conan. "Do you not fear the gods? Crom! is there no honesty anywhere?"

"Oh, please!" she begged, quivering with abject fright. "I couldn't disobey Zargheba. Oh, what shall I do? I shall be cursed by these heathen gods!"

"What do you think the priests will do to you if they find out you're an impostor?" he demanded.

At the thought her legs refused to support her, and she collapsed in a shuddering heap, clasping Conan's knees and mingling incoherent pleas for mercy and protection with piteous protestations of her innocence of any malign intention. It was a vivid change from her pose as the ancient princess, but not surprizing. The fear that had nerved her then was now her undoing.

"Where is Zargheba?" he demanded. "Stop yammering, damn it, and answer me."

"Outside the palace," she whimpered, "watching for the priests."

"How many men with him?"

"None. We came alone."

"Ha!" It was much like the satisfied grunt of a hunting lion. "You must have left Keshia a few hours after I did. Did you climb the cliffs?"

SHE shook her head, too choked with tears to speak coherently. With an impatient imprecation he seized her slim shoulders and shook her until she gasped for breath.

"Will you quit that blubbering and answer me? How did you get into the valley?"

"Zargheba knew the secret way," she gasped. "The priest Gwarunga told him, and Thutmekri. On the south side of the valley there is a broad pool lying at the foot of the cliffs. There is a cave-mouth under the surface of the water that is not visible to the casual glance. We ducked under the water and entered it. The cave slopes up out of the water swiftly and leads through the cliffs. The opening on the side of the valley is masked by heavy thickets."

"I climbed the cliffs on the east side," he muttered. "Well, what then?"

"We came to the palace and Zargheba hid me among the trees while he went to look for the chamber of the oracle. I do not think he fully trusted Gwarunga. While he was gone I thought I heard a gong sound, but I was not sure. Presently Zargheba came and took me into the palace and brought me to this chamber, where the goddess Yelaya lay upon the dais. He stripped the body and clothed me in the garments and ornaments. Then he went forth to hide the body and watch for the priests. I have been afraid. When you entered I wanted to leap up and beg you to take me away from this place, but I feared Zargheba. When you discovered I was alive, I thought I could frighten you away."

"What were you to say as the oracle?" he asked.

"I was to bid the priests to take the Teeth of Gwahlur and give some of them to Thutmekri as a pledge, as he desired, and place the rest in the palace at Keshia. I was to tell them that an awful doom threatened Keshan if they did not agree to Thutmekri's proposals. And oh, yes, I was to tell them that you were to be skinned alive immediately."

"Thutmekri wanted the treasure where he—or the Zembabwans—could lay hand

on it easily," muttered Conan, disregarding the remark concerning himself. "I'll carve his liver yet—Gorulga is a party to this swindle, of course?"

"No. He believes in his gods, and is incorruptible. He knows nothing about this. He will obey the oracle. It was all Thutmekri's plan. Knowing the Keshani would consult the oracle, he had Zargheba bring me with the embassy from Zembabwei, closely veiled and secluded."

"Well, I'm damned!" muttered Conan. "A priest who honestly believes in his oracle, and can not be bribed. Crom! I wonder if it was Zargheba who banged that gong. Did he know I was here? Could he have known about that rotten flagging? Where is he now, girl?"

"Hiding in a thicket of lotus trees, near the ancient avenue that leads from the south wall of the cliffs to the palace," she answered. Then she renewed her importunities. "Oh, Conan, have pity on me! I am afraid of this evil, ancient place. I know I have heard stealthy footfalls padding about me—oh, Conan, take me away with you! Zargheba will kill me when I have served his purpose here—I know it! The priests, too, will kill me if they discover my deceit.

"He is a devil—he bought me from a slave-trader who stole me out of a caravan bound through southern Koth, and has made me the tool of his intrigues ever since. Take me away from him! You can not be as cruel as he. Don't leave me to be slain here! Please! Please!"

She was on her knees, clutching at Conan hysterically, her beautiful tear-stained face upturned to him, her dark silken hair flowing in disorder over her white shoulders. Conan picked her up and set her on his knee.

"Listen to me. I'll protect you from Zargheba. The priests shall not know of your perfidy. But you've got to do as I tell you."

She faltered promises of explicit obedience, clasping his corded neck as if seeking security from the contact.

"Good. When the priests come, you'll act the part of Yelaya, as Zargheba planned—it'll be dark, and in the torchlight they'll never know the difference. But you'll say this to them: 'It is the will of the gods that the Stygian and his Shemitish dogs be driven from Keshan. They are thieves and traitors who plot to rob the gods. Let the Teeth of Gwahlur be placed in the care of the general Conan. Let him lead the armies of Keshan. He is beloved of the gods.' "

She shivered, with an expression of desperation, but acquiesced.

"But Zargheba?" she cried. "He'll kill me!"

"Don't worry about Zargheba," he grunted. "I'll take care of that dog. You do as I say. Here, put up your hair again. It's fallen all over your shoulders. And the gem's fallen out of it."

He replaced the great glowing gem himself, nodding approval.

"It's worth a roomful of slaves, itself alone. Here, put your skirt back on. It's torn down the side, but the priests will never notice it. Wipe your face. A goddess doesn't cry like a whipped schoolgirl. By Crom, you *do* look like Yelaya, face, hair, figure and all! If you act the goddess with the priests as well as you did with me, you'll fool them easily."

"I'll try," she shivered.

"Good; I'm going to find Zargheba."

At that she became panicky again.

"No! Don't leave me alone! This place is haunted!"

"There's nothing here to harm you," he assured her impatiently. "Nothing but Zargheba, and I'm going to look after him. I'll be back shortly. I'll be watching from close by in case anything goes wrong during the ceremony; but if you

play your part properly, nothing will go wrong."

And turning, he hastened out of the oracle chamber; behind him Muriela squeaked wretchedly at his going.

TWILIGHT had fallen. The great rooms and halls were shadowy and indistinct; copper friezes glinted dully through the dusk. Conan strode like a silent phantom through the great halls, with a sensation of being stared at from the shadowed recesses by invisible ghosts of the past. No wonder the girl was nervous amid such surroundings.

He glided down the marble steps like a slinking panther, sword in hand. Silence reigned over the valley, and above the rim of the cliffs stars were blinking out. If the priests of Keshia had entered the valley there was not a sound, not a movement in the greenery to betray them. He made out the ancient broken-paved avenue, wandering away to the south, lost amid clustering masses of fronds and thick-leaved bushes. He followed it warily, hugging the edge of the paving where the shrubs massed their shadows thickly, until he saw ahead of him, dimly in the dusk, the clump of lotus-trees, the strange growth peculiar to the black lands of Kush. There, according to the girl, Zargheba should be lurking. Conan became stealth personified. A velvet-footed shadow, he melted into the thickets.

He approached the lotus grove by a circuitous movement, and scarcely the rustle of a leaf proclaimed his passing. At the edge of the trees he halted suddenly, crouched like a suspicious panther among the deep shrubs. Ahead of him, among the dense leaves, showed a pallid oval, dim in the uncertain light. It might have been one of the great white blossoms which shone thickly among the branches. But Conan knew that it was a man's face. And it was turned toward him. He shrank quickly deeper into the shadows. Had Zargheba seen him? The man was looking directly toward him. Seconds passed. That dim face had not moved. Conan could make out the dark tuft below that was the short black beard.

And suddenly Conan was aware of something unnatural. Zargheba, he knew, was not a tall man. Standing erect, his head would scarcely top the Cimmerian's shoulder; yet that face was on a level with Conan's own. Was the man standing on something? Conan bent and peered toward the ground below the spot where the face showed, but his vision was blocked by undergrowth and the thick boles of the trees. But he saw something else, and he stiffened. Through a slot in the underbrush he glimpsed the stem of the tree under which, apparently, Zargheba was standing. The face was directly in line with that tree. He should have seen below that face, not the tree-trunk, but Zargheba's body—but there was no body there.

Suddenly tenser than a tiger who stalks his prey, Conan glided deeper into the thicket, and a moment later drew aside a leafy branch and glared at the face that had not moved. Nor would it ever move again, of its own volition. He looked on Zargheba's severed head, suspended from the branch of the tree by its own long black hair.

3. The Return of the Oracle

CONAN wheeled supplely, sweeping the shadows with a fiercely questing stare. There was no sign of the murdered man's body; only yonder the tall lush grass was trampled and broken down and the sward was dabbled darkly and wetly. Conan stood scarcely breathing as he strained his ears into the silence. The trees and bushes with their great pallid

blossoms stood dark, still and sinister, etched against the deepening dusk.

Primitive fears whispered at the back of Conan's mind. Was this the work of the priests of Keshan? If so, where were they? Was it Zargheba, after all, who had struck the gong? Again there rose the memory of Bît-Yakin and his mysterious servants. Bît-Yakin was dead, shriveled to a hulk of wrinkled leather and bound in his hollowed crypt to greet the rising sun for ever. But the servants of Bît-Yakin were unaccounted for. *There was no proof they had ever left the valley.*

Conan thought of the girl, Muriela, alone and unguarded in that great shadowy palace. He wheeled and ran back down the shadowed avenue, and he ran as a suspicious panther runs, poised even in full stride to whirl right or left and strike death blows.

The palace loomed through the trees, and he saw something else—the glow of fire reflecting redly from the polished marble. He melted into the bushes that lined the broken street, glided through the dense growth and reached the edge of the open space before the portico. Voices reached him; torches bobbed and their flare shone on glossy ebon shoulders. The priests of Keshan had come.

They had not advanced up the wide, overgrown avenue as Zargheba had expected them to do. Obviously there was more than one secret way into the valley of Alkmeenon.

They were filing up the broad marble steps, holding their torches high. He saw Gorulga at the head of the parade, a profile chiseled out of copper, etched in the torch glare. The rest were acolytes, giant black men from whose skins the torches struck highlights. At the end of the procession there stalked a huge negro with an unusually wicked cast of countenance, at the sight of whom Conan scowled. That was Gwarunga, whom Muriela had named as the man who had revealed the secret of the pool-entrance to Zargheba. Conan wondered how deeply the man was in the intrigues of the Stygian.

He hurried toward the portico, circling the open space to keep in the fringing shadows. They left no one to guard the entrance. The torches streamed steadily down the long dark hall. Before they reached the double-valved door at the other end, Conan had mounted the outer steps and was in the hall behind them. Slinking swiftly along the column-lined wall, he reached the great door as they crossed the huge throne-room, their torches driving back the shadows. They did not look back. In single file, their ostrich plumes nodding, their leopardskin tunics contrasting curiously with the marble and arabesqued metal of the ancient palace, they moved across the wide room and halted momentarily at the golden door to the left of the throne-dais.

Gorulga's voice boomed eerily and hollowly in the great empty space, framed in sonorous phrases unintelligible to the lurking listener; then the high priest thrust open the golden door and entered, bowing repeatedly from his waist, and behind him the torches sank and rose, showering flakes of flame, as the worshippers imitated their master. The gold door closed behind them, shutting out sound and sight, and Conan darted across the throne-chamber and into the alcove behind the throne. He made less sound than a wind blowing across the chamber.

Tiny beams of light streamed through the apertures in the wall, as he pried open the secret panel. Gliding into the niche, he peered through. Muriela sat upright on the dais, her arms folded, her head leaning back against the wall, within a few inches of his eyes. The delicate per-

fume of her foamy hair was in his nostrils. He could not see her face, of course, but her attitude was as if she gazed tranquilly into some far gulf of space, over and beyond the shaven heads of the black giants who knelt before her. Conan grinned with appreciation. "The little slut's an actress," he told himself. He knew she was shriveling with terror, but she showed no sign. In the uncertain flare of the torches she looked exactly like the goddess he had seen lying on that same dais, if one could imagine that goddess imbued with vibrant life.

Gorulga was booming forth some kind of a chant in an accent unfamiliar to Conan, and which was probably some invocation in the ancient tongue of Alkmeenon, handed down from generation to generation of high priests. It seemed interminable. Conan grew restless. The longer the thing lasted, the more terrific would be the strain on Muriela. If she snapped—he hitched his sword and dagger forward. He could not see the little trollop tortured and slain by black men.

But the chant—deep, low-pitched and indescribably ominous—came to a conclusion at last, and a shouted acclaim from the acolytes marked its period. Lifting his head and raising his arms toward the silent form on the dais, Gorulga cried in the deep, rich resonance that was the natural attribute of the Keshani priest: "Oh, great goddess, dweller with the great one of darkness, let thy heart be melted, thy lips opened for the ears of thy slave whose head is in the dust beneath thy feet! Speak, great goddess of the holy valley! Thou knowest the paths before us; the darkness that vexes us is as the light of the midday sun to thee. Shed the radiance of thy wisdom on the paths of thy servants! Tell us, oh mouthpiece of the gods: what is their will concerning Thutmekri the Stygian?"

The high-piled burnished mass of hair that caught the torchlight in dull bronze gleams quivered slightly. A gusty sigh rose from the blacks, half in awe, half in fear. Muriela's voice came plainly to Conan's ears in the breathless silence, and it seemed cold, detached, impersonal, though he winced at the Corinthian accent.

"It is the will of the gods that the Stygian and his Shemitish dogs be driven from Keshan!" She was repeating his exact words. "They are thieves and traitors who plot to rob the gods. Let the Teeth of Gwahlur be placed in the care of the general Conan. Let him lead the armies of Keshan. He is beloved of the gods!"

There was a quiver in her voice as she ended, and Conan began to sweat, believing she was on the point of an hysterical collapse. But the blacks did not notice, any more than they identified the Corinthian accent, of which they knew nothing. They smote their palms softly together and a murmur of wonder and awe rose from them. Gorulga's eyes glittered fanatically in the torchlight.

"Yelaya has spoken!" he cried in an exalted voice. "It is the will of the gods! Long ago, in the days of our ancestors, they were made taboo and hidden at the command of the gods, who wrenched them from the awful jaws of Gwahlur the king of darkness, in the birth of the world. At the command of the gods the Teeth of Gwahlur were hidden; at their command they shall be brought forth again. Oh star-born goddess, give us your leave to go to the secret hiding-place of the Teeth to secure them for him whom the gods love!"

"You have my leave to go!" answered the false goddess, with an imperious gesture of dismissal that set Conan grinning again, and the priests backed out, ostrich

plumes and torches rising and falling with the rhythm of their genuflexions.

The gold door closed and with a moan, the goddess fell back limply on the dais. "Conan!" she whimpered faintly. "Conan!"

"Shhh!" he hissed through the apertures, and turning, glided from the niche and closed the panel. A glimpse past the jamb of the carven door showed him the torches receding across the great throne-room, but he was at the same time aware of a radiance that did not emanate from the torches. He was startled, but the solution presented itself instantly. An early moon had risen and its light slanted through the pierced dome which by some curious workmanship intensified the light. The shining dome of Alkmeenon was no fable, then. Perhaps its interior was of the curious whitely flaming crystal found only in the hills of the black countries. The light flooded the throne-room and seeped into the chambers immediately adjoining.

But as Conan made toward the door that led into the throne-room, he was brought around suddenly by a noise that seemed to emanate from the passage that led off from the alcove. He crouched at the mouth, staring into it, remembering the clangor of the gong that had echoed from it to lure him into a snare. The light from the dome filtered only a little way into that narrow corridor, and showed him only empty space. Yet he could have sworn that he had heard the furtive pad of a foot somewhere down it.

While he hesitated, he was electrified by a woman's strangled cry from behind him. Bounding through the door behind the throne, he saw an unexpected spectacle, in the crystal light.

The torches of the priests had vanished from the great hall outside—but one priest was still in the palace: Gwarunga. His wicked features were convulsed with fury, and he grasped the terrified Muriela by the throat, choking her efforts to scream and plead, shaking her brutally.

"Traitress!" Between his thick red lips his voice hissed like a cobra. "What game are you playing? Did not Zargheba tell you what to say? Aye, Thutmekri told me! Are you betraying your master, or is he betraying his friends through you? Slut! I'll twist off your false head—but first I'll——"

A widening of his captive's lovely eyes as she stared over his shoulder warned the huge black. He released her and wheeled, just as Conan's sword lashed down. The impact of the stroke knocked him headlong backward to the marble floor, where he lay twitching, blood oozing from a ragged gash in his scalp.

Conan started toward him to finish the job—for he knew that the black's sudden movement had caused the blade to strike flat—but Muriela threw her arms convulsively about him.

"I've done as you ordered!" she gasped hysterically. "Take me away! Oh, please take me away!"

"We can't go yet," he grunted. "I want to follow the priests and see where they get the jewels. There may be more loot hidden there. But you can go with me. Where's that gem you wore in your hair?"

"It must have fallen out on the dais," she stammered, feeling for it. "I was so frightened—when the priests left I ran out to find you, and this big brute had stayed behind, and he grabbed me——"

"Well, go get it while I dispose of this carcass," he commanded. "Go on! That gem is worth a fortune itself."

She hesitated, as if loth to return to that cryptic chamber; then, as he grasped Gwarunga's girdle and dragged him into the alcove, she turned and entered the oracle room.

CONAN dumped the senseless black on the floor, and lifted his sword. The Cimmerian had lived too long in the wild places of the world to have any illusions about mercy. The only safe enemy was a headless enemy. But before he could strike, a startling scream checked the lifted blade. It came from the oracle chamber.

"Conan! Conan! *She's come back!*" The shriek ended in a gurgle and a scraping shuffle.

With an oath Conan dashed out of the alcove, across the throne dais and into the oracle chamber, almost before the sound had ceased. There he halted, glaring bewilderedly. To all appearances Muriela lay placidly on the dais, eyes closed as if in slumber.

"What in thunder are you doing?" he demanded acidly. "Is this any time to be playing jokes——"

His voice trailed away. His gaze ran along the ivory thigh molded in the close-fitting silk skirt. That skirt should gape from girdle to hem. He knew, because it had been his own hand that tore it, as he ruthlessly stripped the garment from the dancer's writhing body. But the skirt showed no rent. A single stride brought him to the dais and he laid his hand on the ivory body—snatched it away as if it had encountered hot iron instead of the cold immobility of death.

"Crom!" he muttered, his eyes suddenly slits of bale-fire. "It's not Muriela! It's Yelaya!"

He understood now that frantic scream that had burst from Muriela's lips when she entered the chamber. The goddess had returned. The body had been stripped by Zargheba to furnish the accouterments for the pretender. Yet now it was clad in silk and jewels as Conan had first seen it. A peculiar prickling made itself manifest among the short hairs at the base of Conan's scalp.

"Muriela!" he shouted suddenly. "*Muriela!* Where the devil are you?"

The walls threw back his voice mockingly. There was no entrance that he could see except the golden door, and none could have entered or departed through that without his knowledge. This much was indisputable: Yelaya had been replaced on the dais within the few minutes that had elapsed since Muriela had first left the chamber to be seized by Gwarunga; his ears were still tingling with the echoes of Muriela's scream, yet the Corinthian girl had vanished as if into thin air. There was but one explanation, if he rejected the darker speculation that suggested the supernatural—somewhere in the chamber there was a secret door. And even as the thought crossed his mind, he saw it.

In what had seemed a curtain of solid marble, a thin perpendicular crack showed and in the crack hung a wisp of silk. In an instant he was bending over it. That shred was from Muriela's torn skirt. The implication was unmistakable. It had been caught in the closing door and torn off as she was borne through the opening by whatever grim beings were her captors. The bit of clothing had prevented the door from fitting perfectly into its frame.

Thrusting his dagger-point into the crack, Conan exerted leverage with a corded forearm. The blade bent, but it was of unbreakable Akbitanan steel. The marble door opened. Conan's sword was lifted as he peered into the aperture beyond, but he saw no shape of menace. Light filtering into the oracle chamber revealed a short flight of steps cut out of marble. Pulling the door back to its fullest extent, he drove his dagger into a crack in the floor, propping it open. Then he went down the steps without hesitation. He saw nothing, heard nothing. A dozen steps down, the stair ended in a

narrow corridor which ran straight away into gloom.

He halted suddenly, posed like a statue at the foot of the stair, staring at the paintings which frescoed the walls, half visible in the dim light which filtered down from above. The art was unmistakably Pelishtim; he had seen frescoes of identical characteristics on the walls of Asgalun. But the scenes depicted had no connection with anything Pelishtim, except for one human figure, frequently recurrent: a lean, white-bearded old man whose racial characteristics were unmistakable. They seemed to represent various sections of the palace above. Several scenes showed a chamber he recognized as the oracle chamber with the figure of Yelaya stretched upon the ivory dais and huge black men kneeling before it. And there behind the wall, in the niche, lurked the ancient Pelishtim. And there were other figures, too—figures that moved through the deserted palace, did the bidding of the Pelishtim, and dragged unnamable things out of the subterranean river. In the few seconds Conan stood frozen, hitherto unintelligible phrases in the parchment manuscript blazed in his brain with chilling clarity. The loose bits of the pattern clicked into place. The mystery of Bît-Yakin was a mystery no longer, nor the riddle of Bît-Yakin's servants.

Conan turned and peered into the darkness, an icy finger crawling along his spine. Then he went along the corridor, cat-footed, and without hesitation, moving deeper and deeper into the darkness as he drew farther away from the stair. The air hung heavy with the odor he had scented in the court of the gong.

Now in utter blackness he heard a sound ahead of him—the shuffle of bare feet, or the swish of loose garments against stone, he could not tell which. But an instant later his outstretched hand encountered a barrier which he identified as a massive door of carven metal. He pushed against it fruitlessly, and his sword-point sought vainly for a crack. It fitted into the sill and jambs as if molded there. He exerted all his strength, his feet straining against the floor, the veins knotting in his temples. It was useless; a charge of elephants would scarcely have shaken that titanic portal.

As he leaned there he caught a sound on the other side that his ears instantly identified—it was the creak of rusty iron, like a lever scraping in its slot. Instinctively action followed recognition so spontaneously that sound, impulse and action were practically simultaneous. And as his prodigious bound carried him backward, there was the rush of a great bulk from above, and a thunderous crash filled the tunnel with deafening vibrations. Bits of flying splinters struck him—a huge block of stone, he knew from the sound, dropped on the spot he had just quitted. An instant's slower thought or action and it would have crushed him like an ant.

Conan fell back. Somewhere on the other side of that metal door Muriela was a captive, if she still lived. But he could not pass that door, and if he remained in the tunnel another block might fall, and he might not be so lucky. It would do the girl no good for him to be crushed into a purple pulp. He could not continue his search in that direction. He must get above ground and look for some other avenue of approach.

He turned and hurried toward the stair, sighing as he emerged into comparative radiance. And as he set foot on the first step, the light was blotted out, and above him the marble door rushed shut with a resounding reverberation.

Something like panic seized the Cimmerian then, trapped in that black tunnel, and he wheeled on the stair, lifting his sword and glaring murderously into the darkness behind him, expecting a rush of ghoulish assailants. But there was no sound or movement down the tunnel. Did the men beyond the door—if they *were* men—believe that he had been disposed of by the fall of the stone from the roof, which had undoubtedly been released by some sort of machinery?

Then why had the door been shut above him? Abandoning speculation, Conan groped his way up the steps, his skin crawling in anticipation of a knife in his back at every stride, yearning to drown his semi-panic in a barbarous burst of blood-letting.

He thrust against the door at the top, and cursed soulfully to find that it did not give to his efforts. Then as he lifted his sword with his right hand to hew at the marble, his groping left encountered a metal bolt that evidently slipped into place at the closing of the door. In an instant he had drawn this bolt, and then the door gave to his shove. He bounded into the chamber like a slit-eyed, snarling incarnation of fury, ferociously desirous to come to grips with whatever enemy was hounding him.

The dagger was gone from the floor. The chamber was empty, and so was the dais. Yelaya had again vanished.

"By Crom!" muttered the Cimmerian. "Is she alive, after all?"

He strode out into the throne-room, baffled, and then, struck by a sudden thought, stepped behind the throne and peered into the alcove. There was blood on the smooth marble where he had cast down the senseless body of Gwarunga—that was all. The black man had vanished as completely as Yelaya.

4. *The Teeth of Gwahlur*

BAFFLED wrath confused the brain of Conan the Cimmerian. He knew no more how to go about searching for Muriela than he had known how to go about searching for the Teeth of Gwahlur. Only one thought occurred to him—to follow the priests. Perhaps at the hiding-place of the treasure some clue would be revealed to him. It was a slim chance, but better than wandering about aimlessly.

As he hurried through the great shadowy hall that led to the portico he half expected the lurking shades to come to life behind him with rending fangs and talons. But only the beat of his own rapid heart accompanied him into the moonlight that dappled the shimmering marble.

At the foot of the wide steps he cast about in the bright moonlight for some sign to show him the direction he must go. And he found it—petals scattered on the sward told where an arm or garment had brushed against a blossom-laden branch. Grass had been pressed down under heavy feet. Conan, who had tracked wolves in his native hills, found no insurmountable difficulty in following the trail of the Keshani priests.

It led away from the palace, through masses of exotic-scented shrubbery where great pale blossoms spread their shimmering petals, through verdant, tangled bushes that showered blooms at the touch, until he came at last to a great mass of rock that jutted like a titan's castle out from the cliffs at a point closest to the palace, which, however, was almost hidden from view by vine-interlaced trees. Evidently that babbling priest in Keshia had been mistaken when he said the Teeth were hidden in the palace. This trail had led him away from the place where Muriela had disappeared, but a belief was growing in Conan that each

part of the valley was connected with that palace by subterranean passages.

Crouching in the deep velvet-black shadows of the bushes, he scrutinized the great jut of rock which stood out in bold relief in the moonlight. It was covered with strange, grotesque carvings, depicting men and animals, and half-bestial creatures that might have been gods or devils. The style of art differed so strikingly from that of the rest of the valley, that Conan wondered if it did not represent a different era and race, and was itself a relic of an age lost and forgotten at whatever immeasurably distant date the people of Alkmeenon had found and entered the haunted valley.

A great door stood open in the sheer curtain of the cliff, and a gigantic dragon head was carved about it so that the open door was like the dragon's gaping mouth. The door itself was of carven bronze and looked to weigh several tons. There was no lock that he could see, but a series of bolts showing along the edge of the massive portal, as it stood open, told him that there was some system of locking and unlocking—a system doubtless known only to the priests of Keshan.

The trail showed that Gorulga and his henchmen had gone through that door. But Conan hesitated. To wait until they emerged would probably mean to see the door locked in his face, and he might not be able to solve the mystery of its unlocking. On the other hand, if he followed them in, they might emerge and lock him in the cavern.

Throwing caution to the winds, he glided through the great portal. Somewhere in the cavern were the priests, the Teeth of Gwahlur, and perhaps a clue to the fate of Muriela. Personal risks had never yet deterred him from any purpose.

Moonlight illumined, for a few yards, the wide tunnel in which he found himself. Somewhere ahead of him he saw a faint glow and heard the echo of a weird chanting. The priests were not so far ahead of him as he had thought. The tunnel debouched into a wide room before the moonlight played out, an empty cavern of no great dimensions, but with a lofty, vaulted roof, glowing with a phosphorescent encrustation, which, as Conan knew, was a common phenomenon in that part of the world. It made a ghostly half-light, in which he was able to see a bestial image squatting on a shrine, and the black mouths of six or seven tunnels leading off from the chamber. Down the widest of these—the one directly behind the squat image which looked toward the outer opening—he caught the gleam of torches, wavering whereas the phosphorescent glow was fixed, and heard the chanting increased in volume.

Down it he went recklessly, and was presently peering into a larger cavern than the one he had just left. There was no phosphorus here, but the light of the torches fell on a larger altar and a more obscene and repulsive god squatting toad-like upon it. Before this repugnant deity Gorulga and his ten acolytes knelt and beat their heads upon the ground, while chanting monotonously. Conan realized why their progress had been so slow. Evidently approaching the secret crypt of the Teeth was a complicated and elaborate ritual.

He was fidgeting in nervous impatience before the chanting and bowing were over, but presently they rose and passed into the tunnel which opened behind the idol. Their torches bobbed away into the nighted vault, and he followed swiftly. Not much danger of being discovered. He glided along the shadows like a creature of the night, and the black priests were completely engrossed in their ceremonial mummery. Apparently they

had not even noticed the absence of Gwarunga.

Emerging into a cavern of huge proportions, about whose upward curving walls gallery-like ledges marched in tiers, they began their worship anew before an altar which was larger, and a god which was more disgusting, than any encountered thus far.

Conan crouched in the black mouth of the tunnel, staring at the walls reflecting the lurid glow of the torches. He saw a carven stone stair winding up from tier to tier of the galleries; the roof was lost in darkness.

HE STARTED violently and the chanting broke off as the kneeling blacks flung up their heads. An inhuman voice boomed out high above them. They froze on their knees, their faces turned upward and a ghastly blue hue in the sudden glare of a weird light that burst blindingly up near the lofty roof, and then burned with a throbbing glow. That glare lighted a gallery and a cry went up from the high priest, echoed shudderingly by his acolytes. In the flash there had been briefly disclosed to them a slim white figure standing upright in a sheen of silk and a glint of jewel-crusted gold. Then the blaze smoldered to a throbbing, pulsing luminosity in which nothing was distinct, and that slim shape was but a shimmering blur of ivory.

"Yelaya!" screamed Gorulga, his brown features ashen. "Why have you followed us? What is your pleasure?"

That weird unhuman voice rolled down from the roof, re-echoing under that arching vault that magnified and altered it beyond recognition.

"Wo to the unbelievers! Wo to the false children of Keshia! Doom to them which deny their deity!"

A cry of horror went up from the priests. Gorulga looked like a shocked vulture in the glare of the torches.

"I do not understand!" he stammered. "We are faithful. In the chamber of the oracle you told us——"

"Do not heed what you heard in the chamber of the oracle!" rolled that terrible voice, multiplied until it was as though a myriad voices thundered and muttered the same warning. "Beware of false prophets and false gods! A demon in my guise spoke to you in the palace, giving false prophecy. Now harken and obey, for only I am the true goddess, and I give you one chance to save yourselves from doom!

"Take the Teeth of Gwahlur from the crypt where they were placed so long ago. Alkmeenon is no longer holy, because it has been desecrated by blasphemers. Give the Teeth of Gwahlur into the hands of Thutmekri, the Stygian, to place in the sanctuary of Dagon and Derketo. Only this can save Keshan from the doom the demons of the night have plotted. Take the Teeth of Gwahlur and go; return instantly to Keshia; there give the jewels to Thutmekri, and seize the foreign devil Conan and flay him alive in the great square."

There was no hesitation in obeying. Chattering with fear the priests scrambled up and ran for the door that opened behind the bestial god. Gorulga led the flight. They jammed briefly in the doorway, yelping as wildly waving torches touched squirming black bodies; they plunged through, and the patter of their speeding feet dwindled down the tunnel.

Conan did not follow. He was consumed with a furious desire to learn the truth of this fantastic affair. Was that indeed Yelaya, as the cold sweat on the backs of his hands told him, or was it that little hussy Muriela, turned traitress after all? If it was——

Before the last torch had vanished

down the black tunnel he was bounding vengefully up the stone stair. The blue glow was dying down, but he could still make out that the ivory figure stood motionless on the gallery. His blood ran cold as he approached it, but he did not hesitate. He came on with his sword lifted, and towered like a threat of death over the inscrutable shape.

"Yelaya!" he snarled. "Dead as she's been for a thousand years! *Ha!*"

From the dark mouth of a tunnel behind him a dark form lunged. But the sudden, deadly rush of unshod feet had reached the Cimmerian's quick ears. He whirled like a cat and dodged the blow aimed murderously at his back. As the gleaming steel in the dark hand hissed past him, he struck back with the fury of a roused python, and the long straight blade impaled his assailant and stood out a foot and a half between his shoulders.

"So!" Conan tore his sword free as the victim sagged to the floor, gasping and gurgling. The man writhed briefly and stiffened. In the dying light Conan saw a black body and ebon countenance, hideous in the blue glare. He had killed Gwarunga.

Conan turned from the corpse to the goddess. Thongs about her knees and breast held her upright against a stone pillar, and her thick hair, fastened to the column, held her head up. At a few yards' distance these bonds were not visible in the uncertain light.

"He must have come to after I descended into the tunnel," muttered Conan. "He must have suspected I was down there. So he pulled out the dagger"—Conan stooped and wrenched the identical weapon from the stiffening fingers, glanced at it and replaced it in his own girdle—"and shut the door. Then he took Yelaya to befool his brother idiots. That was he shouting a while ago. You couldn't recognize his voice, under this echoing roof. And that bursting blue flame—I thought it looked familiar. It's a trick of the Stygian priests. Thutmekri must have given some of it to Gwarunga."

The man could easily have reached this cavern ahead of his companions. Evidently familiar with the plan of the caverns by hearsay or by maps handed down in the priestcraft, he had entered the cave after the others, carrying the goddess, followed a circuitous route through the tunnels and chambers, and ensconced himself and his burden on the balcony while Gorulga and the other acolytes were engaged in their endless rituals.

The blue glare had faded, but now Conan was aware of another glow, emanating from the mouth of the one of the corridors that opened on the ledge. Somewhere down that corridor there was another field of phosphorus, for he recognized the faint steady radiance. The corridor led in the direction the priests had taken, and he decided to follow it, rather than descend into the darkness of the great cavern below. Doubtless it connected with another gallery in some other chamber, which might be the destination of the priests. He hurried down it, the illumination growing stronger as he advanced, until he could make out the floor and the walls of the tunnel. Ahead of him and below he could hear the priests chanting again.

Abruptly a doorway in the left-hand wall was limned in the phosphorous glow, and to his ears came the sound of soft, hysterical sobbing. He wheeled, and glared through the door.

He was looking again into a chamber hewn out of solid rock, not a natural cavern like the others. The domed roof shone with the phosphorous light, and the walls were almost covered with arabesques of beaten gold.

Near the farther wall on a granite throne, staring for ever toward the arched doorway, sat the monstrous and obscene Pteor, the god of the Pelishtim, wrought in brass, with his exaggerated attributes reflecting the grossness of his cult. And in his lap sprawled a limp white figure.

"Well, I'll be damned!" muttered Conan. He glanced suspiciously about the chamber, seeing no other entrance or evidence of occupation, and then advanced noiselessly and looked down at the girl whose slim shoulders shook with sobs of abject misery, her face sunk in her arms. From thick bands of gold on the idol's arms slim gold chains ran to smaller bands on her wrists. He laid a hand on her naked shoulder and she started convulsively, shrieked, and twisted her tear-stained face toward him.

"Conan!" She made a spasmodic effort to go into the usual clinch, but the chains hindered her. He cut through the soft gold as close to her wrists as he could, grunting: "You'll have to wear these bracelets until I can find a chisel or a file. Let go of me, damn it! You actresses are too damned emotional. What happened to you, anyway?"

"When I went back into the oracle chamber," she whimpered, "I saw the goddess lying on the dais as I'd first seen her. I called out to you and started to run to the door—then something grabbed me from behind. It clapped a hand over my mouth and carried me through a panel in the wall, and down some steps and along a dark hall. I didn't see what it was that had hold of me until we passed through a big metal door and came into a tunnel whose roof was alight, like this chamber.

"Oh, I nearly fainted when I saw! They are not humans! They are gray, hairy devils that walk like men and speak a gibberish no human could understand. They stood there and seemed to be waiting, and once I thought I heard somebody trying the door. Then one of the *things* pulled a metal lever in the wall, and something crashed on the other side of the door.

"Then they carried me on and on through winding tunnels and up stone stairways into this chamber, where they chained me on the knees of this abominable idol, and then they went away. Oh, Conan, what are they?"

"Servants of Bît-Yakin," he grunted. "I found a manuscript that told me a number of things, and then stumbled upon some frescoes that told me the rest. Bît-Yakin was a Pelishtim who wandered into the valley with his servants after the people of Alkmeenon had deserted it. He found the body of Princess Yelaya, and discovered that the priests returned from time to time to make offerings to her, for even then she was worshipped as a goddess.

"He made an oracle of her, and he was the voice of the oracle, speaking from a niche he cut in the wall behind the ivory dais. The priests never suspected, never saw him or his servants, for they always hid themselves when the men came. Bît-Yakin lived and died here without ever being discovered by the priests. Crom knows how long he dwelt here, but it must have been for centuries. The wise men of the Pelishtim know how to increase the span of their lives for hundreds of years. I've seen some of them myself. Why he lived here alone, and why he played the part of oracle no ordinary human can guess, but I believe the oracle part was to keep the city inviolate and sacred, so he could remain undisturbed. He ate the food the priests brought as an offering to Yelaya, and his servants ate other things—I've always known there was a subterranean river flowing away from the lake where the people of the Puntish highlands throw

their dead. That river runs under this palace. They have ladders hung over the water where they can hang and fish for the corpses that come floating through. Bît-Yakin recorded everything on parchment and painted walls.

"But he died at last, and his servants mummified him according to instructions he gave them before his death, and stuck him in a cave in the cliffs. The rest is easy to guess. His servants, who were even more nearly immortal than he, kept on dwelling here, but the next time a high priest came to consult the oracle, not having a master to restrain them, they tore him to pieces. So since then—until Gorulga—nobody came to talk to the oracle.

"It's obvious they've been renewing the garments and ornaments of the goddess, as they'd seen Bît-Yakin do. Doubtless there's a sealed chamber somewhere where the silks are kept from decay. They clothed the goddess and brought her back to the oracle room after Zargheba had stolen her. And, oh, by the way, they took off Zargheba's head and hung it up in a thicket."

She shivered, yet at the same time breathed a sigh of relief.

"He'll never whip me again."

"Not this side of hell," agreed Conan. "But come on. Gwarunga ruined my chances with his stolen goddess. I'm going to follow the priests and take my chance of stealing the loot from them after they get it. And you stay close to me. I can't spend all my time looking for you."

"But the servants of Bît-Yakin!" she whispered fearfully.

"We'll have to take our chance," he grunted. "I don't know what's in their minds, but so far they haven't shown any disposition to come out and fight in the open. Come on."

Taking her wrist he led her out of the chamber and down the corridor. As they advanced they heard the chanting of the priests, and mingling with the sound the low sullen rushing of waters. The light grew stronger above them as they emerged on a high-pitched gallery of a great cavern and looked down on a scene weird and fantastic.

Above them gleamed the phosphorescent roof; a hundred feet below them stretched the smooth floor of the cavern. On the far side this floor was cut by a deep, narrow stream brimming its rocky channel. Rushing out of impenetrable gloom, it swirled across the cavern and was lost again in darkness. The visible surface reflected the radiance above; the dark seething waters glinted as if flecked with living jewels, frosty blue, lurid red, shimmering green, an ever-changing iridescence.

Conan and his companion stood upon one of the gallery-like ledges that banded the curve of the lofty wall, and from this ledge a natural bridge of stone soared in a breath-taking arch over the vast gulf of the cavern to join a much smaller ledge on the opposite side, across the river. Ten feet below it another, broader arch spanned the cave. At either end a carven stair joined the extremities of these flying arches.

Conan's gaze, following the curve of the arch that swept away from the ledge on which they stood, caught a glint of light that was not the lurid phosphorus of the cavern. On that small ledge opposite them there was an opening in the cave wall through which stars were glinting.

But his full attention was drawn to the scene beneath them. The priests had reached their destination. There in a sweeping angle of the cavern wall stood a stone altar, but there was no idol upon it. Whether there was one behind it, Co-

nan could not ascertain, because some trick of the light, or the sweep of the wall, left the space behind the altar in total darkness.

The priests had stuck their torches into holes in the stone floor, forming a semicircle of fire in front of the altar at a distance of several yards. Then the priests themselves formed a semicircle inside the crescent of torches, and Gorulga, after lifting his arms aloft in invocation, bent to the altar and laid hands on it. It lifted and tilted backward on its hinder edge, like the lid of a chest, revealing a small crypt.

Extending a long arm into the recess, Gorulga brought up a small brass chest. Lowering the altar back into place, he set the chest on it, and threw back the lid. To the eager watchers on the high gallery it seemed as if the action had released a blaze of living fire which throbbed and quivered about the opened chest. Conan's heart leaped and his hand caught at his hilt. The Teeth of Gwahlur at last! The treasure that would make its possessor the richest man in the world! His breath came fast between his clenched teeth.

Then he was suddenly aware that a new element had entered into the light of the torches and of the phosphorescent roof, rendering both void. Darkness stole around the altar, except for that glowing spot of evil radiance cast by the Teeth of Gwahlur, and that grew and grew. The blacks froze into basaltic statues, their shadows streaming grotesquely and gigantically out behind them.

The altar was laved in the glow now, and the astounded features of Gorulga stood out in sharp relief. Then the mysterious space behind the altar swam into the widening illumination. And slowly with the crawling light, figures became visible, like shapes growing out of the night and silence.

At first they seemed like gray stone statues, those motionless shapes, hairy, man-like, yet hideously human; but their eyes were alive, cold sparks of gray icy fire. And as the weird glow lit their bestial countenances, Gorulga screamed and fell backward, throwing up his long arms in a gesture of frenzied horror.

But a longer arm shot across the altar and a misshapen hand locked on his throat. Screaming and fighting, the high priest was dragged back across the altar; a hammer-like fist smashed down, and Gorulga's cries were stilled. Limp and broken he sagged across the altar, his brains oozing from his crushed skull. And then the servants of Bît-Yakin surged like a bursting flood from hell on the black priests who stood like horror-blasted images.

Then there was slaughter, grim and appalling.

Conan saw black bodies tossed like chaff in the inhuman hands of the slayers, against whose horrible strength and agility the daggers and swords of the priests were ineffective. He saw men lifted bodily and their heads cracked open against the stone altar. He saw a flaming torch, grasped in a monstrous hand, thrust inexorably down the gullet of an agonized wretch who writhed in vain against the arms that pinioned him. He saw a man torn in two pieces, as one might tear a chicken, and the bloody fragments hurled clear across the cavern. The massacre was as short and devastating as the rush of a hurricane. In a burst of red abysmal ferocity it was over, except for one wretch who fled screaming back the way the priests had come, pursued by a swarm of blood-dabbled shapes of horror which reached out their red-smeared hands for him. Fugitive and pursuers vanished down the black tunnel, and the screams of the human came back dwindling and confused by the distance.

MURIELA was on her knees clutching Conan's legs; her face pressed against his knee and her eyes tightly shut. She was a quaking, quivering mold of abject terror. But Conan was galvanized. A quick glance across at the aperture where the stars shone, a glance down at the chest that still blazed open on the blood-smeared altar, and he saw and seized the desperate gamble.

"I'm going after that chest!" he grated. "Stay here!"

"Oh Mitra, no!" In an agony of fright she fell to the floor and caught at his sandals. "Don't! Don't! Don't leave me!"

"Lie still and keep your mouth shut!" he snapped, disengaging himself from her frantic clasp.

He disregarded the tortuous stair. He dropped from ledge to ledge with reckless haste. There was no sign of the monsters as his feet hit the floor. A few of the torches still flared in their sockets, the phosphorescent glow throbbed and quivered, and the river flowed with an almost articulate muttering, scintillant with undreamed radiances. The glow that had heralded the appearance of the servants had vanished with them. Only the light of the jewels in the brass chest shimmered and quivered.

He snatched the chest, noting its contents in one lustful glance—strange, curiously shapen stones that burned with an icy, nonterrestrial fire. He slammed the lid, thrust the chest under his arm, and ran back up the steps. He had no desire to encounter the hellish servants of Bît-Yakin. His glimpse of them in action had dispelled any illusion concerning their fighting ability. Why they had waited so long before striking at the invaders he was unable to say. What human could guess the motives or thoughts of these monstrosities? That they were possessed of craft and intelligence equal to humanity had been demonstrated. And there on the cavern floor lay crimson proof of their bestial ferocity.

The Corinthian girl still cowered on the gallery where he had left her. He caught her wrist and yanked her to her feet, grunting: "I guess it's time to go!"

Too bemused with terror to be fully aware of what was going on, the girl suffered herself to be led across the dizzy span. It was not until they were poised over the rushing water that she looked down, voiced a startled yelp and would have fallen but for Conan's massive arm about her. Growling an objurgation in her ear, he snatched her up under his free arm and swept her, in a flutter of limply waving arms and legs, across the arch and into the aperture that opened at the other end. Without bothering to set her on her feet, he hurried through the short tunnel into which this aperture opened. An instant later they emerged upon a narrow ledge on the outer side of the cliffs that circled the valley. Less than a hundred feet below them the jungle waved in the starlight.

Looking down, Conan vented a gusty sigh of relief. He believed that he could negotiate the descent, even though burdened with the jewels and the girl; although he doubted if even he, unburdened, could have ascended at that spot. He set the chest, still smeared with Gorulga's blood and clotted with his brains, on the ledge, and was about to remove his girdle in order to tie the box to his back, when he was galvanized by a sound behind him, a sound sinister and unmistakable.

"Stay here!" he snapped at the bewildered Corinthian girl. "Don't move!" And drawing his sword, he glided into the tunnel, glaring back into the cavern.

Half-way across the upper span he saw a gray deformed shape. One of the servants of Bît-Yakin was on his trail.

There was no doubt that the brute had seen them and was following them. Conan did not hesitate. It might be easier to defend the mouth of the tunnel—but this fight must be finished quickly, before the other servants could return.

He ran out on the span, straight toward the oncoming monster. It was no ape, neither was it a man. It was some shambling horror spawned in the mysterious, nameless jungles of the south, where strange life teemed in the reeking rot without the dominance of man, and drums thundered in temples that had never known the tread of a human foot. How the ancient Pelishtim had gained lordship over them—and with it eternal exile from humanity—was a foul riddle about which Conan did not care to speculate, even if he had had opportunity.

Man and monster; they met at the highest arch of the span, where, a hundred feet below, rushed the furious black water. As the monstrous shape with its leprous gray body and the features of a carven, unhuman idol loomed over him, Conan struck as a wounded tiger strikes, with every ounce of thew and fury behind the blow. That stroke would have sheared a human body asunder; but the bones of the servant of Bît-Yakin were like tempered steel. Yet even tempered steel could not wholly have withstood that furious stroke. Ribs and shoulder-bone parted and blood spouted from the great gash.

There was no time for a second stroke. Before the Cimmerian could lift his blade again or spring clear, the sweep of a giant arm knocked him from the span as a fly is flicked from a wall. As he plunged downward the rush of the river was like a knell in his ears, but his twisting body fell half-way across the lower arch. He wavered there precariously for one blood-chilling instant, then his clutching fingers hooked over the farther edge, and he scrambled to safety, his sword still in his other hand.

As he sprang up, he saw the monster, spurting blood hideously, rush toward the cliff-end of the bridge, obviously intending to descend the stair that connected the arches and renew the feud. At the very ledge the brute paused in mid-flight—and Conan saw it too—Muriela, with the jewel chest under her arm, stood staring wildly in the mouth of the tunnel.

With a triumphant bellow the monster scooped her up under one arm, snatched the jewel chest with the other hand as she dropped it, and turning, lumbered back across the bridge. Conan cursed with passion and ran for the other side also. He doubted if he could climb the stair to the higher arch in time to catch the brute before it could plunge into the labyrinths of tunnels on the other side.

But the monster was slowing, like clockwork running down. Blood gushed from that terrible gash in his breast, and he lurched drunkenly from side to side. Suddenly he stumbled, reeled and toppled sidewise—pitched headlong from the arch and hurtled downward. Girl and jewel chest fell from his nerveless hands and Muriela's scream rang terribly above the snarl of the water below.

Conan was almost under the spot from which the creature had fallen. The monster struck the lower arch glancingly and shot off, but the writhing figure of the girl struck and clung, and the chest hit the edge of the span near her. One falling object struck on one side of Conan and one on the other. Either was within arm's length; for the fraction of a split second the chest teetered on the edge of the bridge, and Muriela clung by one arm, her face turned desperately toward Conan, her eyes dilated with the fear of

death and her lips parted in a haunting cry of despair.

CONAN did not hesitate, nor did he even glance toward the chest that held the wealth of an epoch. With a quickness that would have shamed the spring of a hungry jaguar, he swooped, grasped the girl's arm just as her fingers slipped from the smooth stone, and snatched her up on the span with one explosive heave. The chest toppled on over and struck the water ninety feet below, where the body of the servant of Bît-Yakin had already vanished. A splash, a jetting flash of foam marked where the Teeth of Gwahlur disappeared for ever from the sight of man.

Conan scarcely wasted a downward glance. He darted across the span and ran up the cliff stair like a cat, carrying the limp girl as if she had been an infant. A hideous ululation caused him to glance over his shoulder as he reached the higher arch, to see the other servants streaming back into the cavern below, blood dripping from their bared fangs. They raced up the stair that wound up from tier to tier, roaring vengefully; but he slung the girl unceremoniously over his shoulder, dashed through the tunnel and went down the cliffs like an ape himself, dropping and springing from hold to hold with breakneck recklessness. When the fierce countenances looked over the ledge of the aperture, it was to see the Cimmerian and the girl disappearing into the forest that surrounded the cliffs.

"Well," said Conan, setting the girl on her feet within the sheltering screen of branches, "we can take our time now. I don't think those brutes will follow us outside the valley. Anyway, I've got a horse tied at a water-hole close by, if the lions haven't eaten him. Crom's devils! What are you crying about *now?*"

She covered her tear-stained face with her hands, and her slim shoulders shook with sobs.

"I lost the jewels for you," she wailed miserably. "It was my fault. If I'd obeyed you and stayed out on the ledge, that brute would never have seen me. You should have caught the gems and let me drown!"

"Yes, I suppose I should," he agreed. "But forget it. Never worry about what's past. And stop crying, will you? That's better. Come on."

"You mean you're going to keep me? Take me with you?" she asked hopefully.

"What else do you suppose I'd do with you?" He ran an approving glance over her figure and grinned at the torn skirt which revealed a generous expanse of tempting ivory-tinted curves. "I can use an actress like you. There's no use going back to Keshia. There's nothing in Keshan now that I want. We'll go to Punt. The people of Punt worship an ivory woman, and they wash gold out of the rivers in wicker baskets. I'll tell them that Keshan is intriguing with Thutmekri to enslave them—which is true—and that the gods have sent me to protect them—for about a houseful of gold. If I can manage to smuggle you into their temple to exchange places with their ivory goddess, we'll skin them out of their jaw teeth before we get through with them!"

"Smith looked down at what he still gripped between his hands."

Julhi

By C. L. MOORE

A thrilling tale of Northwest Smith, outlaw of three worlds, who tasted cosmic sensations never known before to mortal man—a superb story by the author of "Shambleau."

THE tale of Smith's scars would make a saga. From head to foot his brown and sunburnt hide was scored with the marks of battle. The eye of a connoisseur would recognize the distinctive tracks of knife and talon and ray-burn, the slash of the Martian drylander *cring*, the clean, thin stab of the Venusian stiletto, the crisscross lacing of Earth's penal whip. But one or two scars that he carried would have baffled the most discerning eye. That curious, convoluted red

circlet, for instance, like some bloody rose on the left side of his chest just where the beating of his heart stirred the sun-darkened flesh . . .

IN THE starless dark of the thick Venusian night Northwest Smith's pale steel eyes were keen and wary. Save for those restless eyes he did not stir. He crouched against a wall that his searching fingers had told him was stone, and cold; but he could see nothing and he had no faintest idea of where he was or how he had come there. Upon this dark five minutes ago he had opened puzzled eyes, and he was still puzzled. The dark-piercing pallor of his gaze flickered restlessly through the blackness, searching in vain for some point of familiarity. He could find nothing. The dark was blurred and formless around him, and though his keen senses spoke to him of enclosed spaces, yet there was a contradiction even in that, for the air was fresh and blowing.

He crouched motionless in the windy dark, smelling earth and cold stone, and faintly—very faintly—a whiff of something unfamiliar that made him gather his feet under him noiselessly and poise with one hand against the chill stone wall, tense as a steel spring. There was motion in the dark. He could see nothing, hear nothing, but he felt that stirring come cautiously nearer. He stretched out exploring toes, found the ground firm underfoot, and stepped aside a soundless pace or two, holding his breath. Against the stone where he had been leaning an instant before he heard the soft sound of hands fumbling, with a queer, sucking noise, as if they were sticky. Something exhaled with a small, impatient sound. In a lull of the wind he heard quite distinctly the slither over stone of something that was neither feet nor paws nor serpent-coils, but akin to all three.

● When C. L. Moore burst upon the literary firmament a year and a half ago with "Shambleau," the author was compared to a brilliant new star bursting into view in the sky. But unlike a nova, this author's light did not go out, but on the contrary it grew and grew, until now C. L. Moore is acknowledged throughout the English-speaking world as one of the supreme masters of fantastic fiction. Northwest Smith, the doughty hero of "Shambleau" and several stories that followed it, is a literary sensation. The author now returns to this fascinating character in the present strange tale, "Julhi." If you have not heretofore experienced the thrill of reading a Northwest Smith story, you will enjoy making that strange outlaw's acquaintance in this story. We recommend it to you.

Smith's hand sought his hip by instinct, and came away empty. Where he was and how he came there he did not know, but his weapons were gone and he knew that their absence was not accidental. The something that was pursuing him sighed again, queerly, and the shuffling sound over the stones moved with sudden, appalling swiftness, and something touched him that stung like an electric shock. There were hands upon him, but he scarcely realized it, or that they were no human hands, before the darkness spun around him and the queer, thrilling shock sent him reeling into a blurred oblivion.

When he opened his eyes again he lay once more upon cold stone in the unfathomable dark to which he had awakened before. He lay as he must have fallen when the searcher dropped him, and he was unhurt. He waited, tense and

listening, until his ears ached with the strain and the silence. So far as his blade-keen senses could tell him, he was quite alone. No sound broke the utter stillness, no sensation of movement, no whiff of scent. Very cautiously he rose once more, supporting himself against the unseen stones and flexing his limbs to be sure that he was unhurt.

The floor was uneven underfoot. He had the idea now that he must be in some ancient ruins, for the smell of stone and chill and desolation was clear to him, and the breeze moaned a little through unseen openings. He felt his way along the broken wall, stumbling over fallen blocks and straining his senses against the blanketing gloom around him. He was trying vainly to recall how he had come here, and succeeding in recapturing only vague memories of much red *segir* whisky in a nameless dive, and confusion and muffled voices thereafter, and wide spaces of utter blank—and then awakening here in the dark. The whisky must have been drugged, he told himself defensively, and a slow anger began to smolder within him at the temerity of whoever it was who had dared lay hands upon Northwest Smith.

Then he froze into stony quiet, rigid in mid-step, at the all but soundless stirring of something in the dark near by. Blurred visions of the unseen thing that had seized him ran through his head—some monster whose gait was a pattering glide and whose hands were armed with the stunning shock of an unknown force. He stood frozen, wondering if it could see him in the dark.

Feet whispered over the stone very near him, and something breathed pantingly, and a hand brushed his face. There was a quick suck of indrawn breath, and then Smith's arms leaped out to grapple the invisible thing to him. The surprize of that instant took his breath, and then he laughed deep in his throat and swung the girl round to face him in the dark.

He could not see her, but he knew from the firm curves of her under his hands that she was young and feminine, and from the sound of her breath that she was near to fainting with fright.

"Sh-h-h," he whispered urgently, his lips at her ear and her hair brushing his cheek fragrantly. "Don't be afraid. Where are we?"

It might have been reaction from her terror that relaxed the tense body he held, so that she went limp in his arms and the sound of her breathing almost ceased. He lifted her clear of the ground—she was light and fragrant and he felt the brush of velvet garments against his bare arms as unseen robes swept him—and carried her across to the wall. He felt better with something solid at his back. He laid her down there in the angle of the stones and crouched beside her, listening, while she slowly regained control of herself.

When her breathing was normal again, save for the faint hurrying of excitement and alarm, he heard the sound of her sitting up against the wall, and bent closer to catch her whisper.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Northwest Smith," he said under his breath, and grinned at her softly murmured "Oh-h!" of recognition. Whoever she was, she had heard that name before. Then,

"There has been a mistake," she breathed, half to herself. "They never take any but the—the space-rats and the scum of the ports for Julhi to—I mean, to bring here. They must not have known you, and they will pay for that mistake. No man is brought here who might be searched for—afterward."

Smith was silent for a moment. He had

thought her lost like himself, and her fright had been too genuine for pretense. Yet she seemed to know the secrets of this curious, unlit place. He must go warily.

"Who are you?" he murmured. "Why were you so frightened? Where are we?"

In the dark her breath caught in a little gasp, and went on unevenly.

"We are in the ruins of Vonng," she whispered. "I am Apri, and I am condemned to death. I thought you were death coming for me, as it will come at any instant now." Her voice failed on the last syllables, so that she spoke in a fading gasp as if terror had her by the throat and would not let her breathe. He felt her trembling against his arm.

Many questions crowded up to his lips, but the most urgent found utterance.

"What will come?" he demanded. "What is the danger?"

"The haunters of Vonng," she whispered fearfully. "It is to feed them that Julhi's slaves bring men here. And those among us who are disobedient must feed the haunters too. I have suffered her displeasure—and I must die."

"The haunters—what are they? Something with a touch like a live wire had me awhile ago, but it let me loose again. Could that have been——"

"Yes, one of them. My coming must have disturbed it. But as to what they are, I don't know. They come in the darkness. They are of Julhi's race, I think, but not flesh and blood, like her. I—I can't explain."

"And Julhi——?"

"Is—well, simply Julhi. You don't know?"

"A woman? Some queen, perhaps? You must remember I don't even know where I am."

"No, not a woman. At least, not as I am. And much more than queen. A great sorceress, I have thought, or perhaps a goddess. I don't know. It makes me ill to think, here in Vonng. It makes me ill to—to—oh, I couldn't bear it! I think I was going mad! It's better to die than go mad, isn't it? But I'm so afraid——"

Her voice trailed away incoherently, and she cowered shivering against him in the dark.

Smith had been listening above her shuddering whispers for any tiniest sound in the night. Now he turned his mind more fully to what she had been saying, though with an ear still alert for any noises about them.

"What do you mean? What was it you did?"

"There is a—a light," murmured Apri vaguely. "I've always seen it, even from babyhood, whenever I closed my eyes and tried to make it come. A light, and queer shapes and shadows moving through it, like reflections from somewhere I never saw before. But somehow it got out of control, and then I began to catch the strangest thought-waves beating through, and after awhile Julhi came—through the light. I don't know—I can't understand. But she makes me summon up the light for her now, and then queer things happen inside my head, and I'm ill and dizzy, and—and I think I'm going mad. But she makes me do it. And it grows worse, you know, each time worse, until I can't bear it. Then she's angry, and that dreadful still look comes over her face—and this time she sent me here. The haunters will come, now——"

SMITH tightened his arm comfortingly about her, thinking that she was perhaps a little mad already.

"How can we get out of here?" he demanded, shaking her gently to call back her wandering mind. "Where are we?"

"In Vonng. Don't you understand? On the island where Vonng's ruins are."

He remembered then. He had heard of Vonng, somewhere. The ruins of an old city lost in the tangle of vines upon a small island a few hours off the coast of Shann. There were legends that it had been a great city once, and a strange one. A king with curious powers had built it, a king in league with beings better left unnamed, so the whispers ran. The stone had been quarried with unnamable rites, and the buildings were very queerly shaped, for mysterious purposes. Some of its lines ran counterwise to the understanding even of the men who laid them out, and at intervals in the streets, following a pattern certainly not of their own world, medallions had been set, for reasons known to none but the king. Smith remembered what he had heard of the strangeness of fabulous Vonng, and of the rites that attended its building, and that at last some strange plague had overrun it, driving men mad . . . something about ghosts that flickered through the streets at midday; so that at last the dwellers there had deserted it, and for centuries it had stood here, slowly crumbling into decay. No one ever visited the place now, for civilization had moved inland since the days of Vonng's glory, and uneasy tales still ran through men's minds about the queer things that had happened here once.

"Julhi lives in these ruins?" he demanded.

"Julhi lives here, but not in a ruined Vonng. Her Vonng is a splendid city. I have seen it, but I could never enter."

"Quite mad," thought Smith compassionately. And aloud, "Are there no boats here? No way to escape at all?"

Almost before the last words had left his lips he heard something like the humming of countless bees begin to ring in his ears. It grew and deepened and swelled until his head was filled with sound, and the cadences of that sound said,

"No. No way. Julhi forbids it."

In Smith's arms the girl startled and clung to him convulsively.

"It is Julhi!" she gasped. "Do you feel her, singing in your brain? Julhi!"

Smith heard the voice swelling louder, until it seemed to fill the whole night, humming with an intolerable volume.

"Yes, my little Apri. It is I. Do you repent your disobedience, my Apri?"

Smith felt the girl trembling against him. He could hear her heart pounding, and the breath rushed chokingly through her lips.

"No—no, I do not," he heard her murmur, very softly. "Let me die, Julhi."

The voice hummed with a purring sweetness.

"Die, my pretty? Julhi could not be so cruel. Oh no, little Apri, I but frightened you for punishment. You are forgiven now. You may return to me and serve me again, my Apri. I would not let you die." The voice was cloyingly sweet.

Apri's voice crescendoed into hysterical rebellion.

"No, no! I will not serve you! Not again, Julhi! Let me die!"

"Peace, peace, my little one." That humming was hypnotic in its soothing lilt. "You will serve me. Yes, you will obey me as before, my pretty. You have found a man there, haven't you, little one? Bring him with you, and come."

Apri's unseen hands clawed frantically at Smith's shoulders, tearing herself free, pushing him away.

"Run, run!" she gasped. "Climb this wall and run! You can throw yourself over the cliff and be free. Run, I say, before it's too late. Oh, *Shar, Shar,* if I were free to die!"

Smith prisoned the clawing hands in one of his and shook her with the other.

"Be still!" he snapped. "You're hysterical. Be still, I say!"

He felt the shuddering slacken. The straining hands fell quiet. By degrees her panting breath evened.

"Come," she said at last, and in quite a different voice. "Julhi commands it. Come."

Her fingers twined firmly in his, and she stepped forward without hesitation into the dark. He followed, stumbling over debris, bruising himself against the broken walls. How far they went he did not know, but the way turned and twisted and doubled back upon itself, and he had, somehow, the curious idea that she was not following a course through corridors and passages which she knew well enough not to hesitate over, but somehow, under the influence of Julhi's sorcery, treading a symbolic pattern among the stones, tracing it out with unerring feet—a witch-pattern that, when it was completed, would open a door for them which no eyes could see, no hands unlock.

It may have been Julhi who put that certainty in his mind, but he was quite sure of it as the girl walked on along her intricate path, threading silently in and out among the unseen ruins, nor was he surprized when without warning the floor became smooth underfoot and the walls seemed to fall away from about him, the smell of cold stone vanished from the air. Now he walked in darkness over a thick carpet, through sweetly scented air, warm and gently moving with invisible currents. In that dark he was somehow aware of eyes upon him. Not physical eyes, but a more all-pervading inspection. Presently the humming began again, swelling through the air and beating in his ears in sweetly pitched cadences.

"Hm-m-m . . . have you brought me a man from Earth, my Apri? Yes, an Earthman, and a fine one. I am pleased with you, Apri, for saving me this man. I shall call him to me presently. Until then let him wander, for he can not escape."

The air fell quiet again, and about him Smith gradually became aware of a dawning light. It swelled from no visible source, but it paled the utter dark to a twilight through which he could see tapestries and richly glowing columns about him, and the outlines of the girl Apri standing at his side. The twilight paled in turn, and the light grew strong, and presently he stood in full day among the queer, rich furnishings of the place into which he had come.

He stared round in vain for signs of the way they had entered. The room was a small cleared space in the midst of a forest of shining pillars of polished stone. Tapestries were stretched between some of them, swinging down in luxuriant folds. But as far as he could see in all directions the columns reached away in diminishing aisles, and he was quite sure that they had not made their way to this place through the clustering pillars. He would have been aware of them. No, he had stepped straight from Vonng's stone-strewn ruins upon this rug which carpeted the little clear space, through some door invisible to him.

He turned to the girl. She had sunk upon one of the divans which stood between the columns around the edge of the circular space. She was paler than the marble, and very lovely, as he had known she would be. She had the true Venusian's soft, dark, sidelong eyes, and her mouth was painted coral, and her hair swept in black, shining clouds over her shoulders. The tight-swathed Venusian robe clung to her in folds of rose-red velvet, looped to leave one shoulder bare,

and slit, as all Venusian women's garments are, to let one leg flash free with every other step. It is the most flattering dress imaginable for any woman to wear, but Apri needed no flattery to make her beautiful. Smith's pale eyes were appreciative as he stared.

She met his gaze apathetically. All rebellion seemed to have gone out of her, and a strange exhaustion had drained the color from her face.

"Where are we now?" demanded Smith.

She gave him an oblique glance.

"This is the place Julhi uses for a prison," she murmured, almost indifferently. "Around us I suppose her slaves are moving, and the halls of her palace stretch. I can't explain it to you, but at Julhi's command anything can happen. We could be in the midst of her palace and never suspect it, for there is no escape from here. We can do nothing but wait."

"Why?" Smith nodded toward the columned vistas stretching away all around them. "What's beyond that?"

"Nothing. It simply extends like that until—until you find yourself back here again."

Smith glanced at her swiftly under lowered lids, wondering just how mad she really was. Her white, exhausted face told him nothing.

"Come along," he said at last. "I'm going to try, anyhow."

She shook her head.

"No use. Julhi can find you when she is ready. There is no escape from Julhi."

"I'm going to try," he said again, stubbornly. "Are you coming?"

"No. I'm—tired. I'll wait for you here. You'll come back."

He turned without further words and plunged at random into the wilderness of pillars surrounding the little carpeted room. The floor was slippery under his boots, and dully shining. The pillars, too, shone along all their polished surfaces, and in the queer light diffused throughout the place no shadows fell; so that a dimension seemed to be lacking and a curious flatness lay over all the shining forest. He went on resolutely, looking back now and again to keep his course straight away from the little clear space he had left. He watched it dwindle behind him and lose itself among the columns and vanish, and he wandered on through endless wilderness, to the sound of his own echoing footsteps, with nothing to break the monotony of the shining pillars until he thought he glimpsed a cluster of tapestries far ahead through the unshadowed vistas and began to hurry, hoping against hope that he had found at least a way out of the forest. He reached the place at last, and pulled aside the tapestry, and met Apri's wearily smiling eyes. The way somehow had doubled back upon him.

He snorted disgustedly at himself and turned again to plunge into the columns. This time he had wandered for no more than ten minutes before he found himself coming back once more into the clearing. He tried a third time, and it seemed had taken no more than a dozen steps before the way twisted under his feet and catapulted him back again into the room he had just left. Apri smiled as he flung himself upon one of the divans and regarded her palely from under knit brows.

"There is no escape," she repeated. "I think this place is built upon some different plan from any we know, with all its lines running in a circle whose center is this room. For only a circle has boundaries, yet no end, like this wilderness around us."

"Who is Julhi?" demanded Smith abruptly. "*What* is she?"

"She is—a goddess, perhaps. Or a devil from hell. Or both. And she comes from the place beyond the light—I can't explain it to you. It was I who opened the door for her, I think, and through me she looks back into that light that I must call up for her when she commands me. And I shall go mad—mad!"

Desperation flamed from her eyes suddenly and faded again, leaving her face whiter than before. Her hands rose in a small, futile gesture and dropped to her lap again. She shook her head.

"No—not wholly mad. She would never permit me even that escape, for then I could not summon up the light and so open the window for her to look backward into that land from which she came. That land——"

"Look!" broke in Smith. "The light——"

Apri glanced up and nodded almost indifferently.

"Yes. It's darkening again. Julhi will summon you now, I think."

Rapidly the illumination was failing all about them, and the columned forests melted into dimness, and dark veiled the long vistas, and presently everything clouded together and black night fell once more. This time they did not move, but Smith was aware, remotely, of a movement all about them, subtle and indescribable, as if the scenes were being shifted behind the curtain of the dark. The air quivered with motion and change. Even under his feet the floor was shifting, not tangibly but with an inner metamorphosis he could put no name to.

And then the dark began to lift again. Light diffused slowly through it, paling the black, until he stood in a translucent twilight through whose veil he could see that the whole scene had changed about him. He saw Apri from the corner of his eye, heard her quickened breathing beside him, but he did not turn his head. Those columned vistas were gone. The limitless aisles down which he had wandered were closed now by great walls uplifting all around.

His eyes rose to seek the ceiling, and as the dusk lightened into day once more he became aware of a miraculous quality about those walls. A curious wavy pattern ran around them in broad bands, and as he stared he realized that the bands were not painted upon the surface, but were integrally part of the walls themselves, and that each successive band lessened in density. Those along the base of the walls were heavily dark, but the rising patterns paled and became less solid as they rose, until at half-way up the wall they were like layers of patterned smoke, and farther up still bands of scarcely discernible substance more tenuous than mist. Around the heights they seemed to melt into pure light, to which he could not lift his eyes for the dazzling brilliance of it.

In the center of the room rose a low black couch, and upon it—Julhi. He knew that instinctively the moment he saw her, and in that first moment he realized nothing but her beauty. He caught his breath at the sleek and shining loveliness of her, lying on her black couch and facing him with a level, unwinking stare. Then he realized her unhumanity, and a tiny prickling ran down his back—for she was one of that very ancient race of one-eyed beings about which whispers persist so unescapably in folklore and legend, though history has forgotten them for ages. One-eyed. A clear eye, uncolored, centered in the midst of a fair, broad forehead. Her features were arranged in a diamond-shaped pattern instead of humanity's triangle, for the slanting nostrils of her low-bridged nose were

set so far apart that they might have been separate features, tilting and exquisitely modeled. Her mouth was perhaps the queerest feature of her strange yet somehow lovely face. It was perfectly heart-shaped, in an exaggerated cupid's-bow, but it was not a human mouth. It did not close, ever. It was a beautifully arched orifice, the red lip that rimmed it compellingly crimson, but fixed and moveless in an unhinged jaw. Behind the bowed opening he could see the red, fluted tissue of flesh within.

Above that single, clear, deep-lashed eye something sprang backward from her brow in a splendid sweep, something remotely feather-like, yet no such feather as was ever fledged upon any bird alive. It was exquisitely iridescent, and its fronds shivered with blowing color at the slight motion of her breathing.

For the rest—well, as the lines of a lap-dog travesty the clean, lean grace of a racing greyhound, so humanity's shape travestied the serpentine loveliness of her body. And it was definitely humanity that aped her form, not herself aping humanity. Somehow she was so *right* in every flowing, curving line, so unerringly fashioned toward some end he could not guess, yet to which instinctively he conceded her perfect fitness.

There was a fluidity about her, a litheness that partook more of the serpent's rippling flow than of any warm-blooded creature's motion, but her body was not like any being, warm-blooded or cold, that he had ever seen before. From the waist up she was human, but below all resemblance ended. And yet she was so breath-takingly lovely. Any attempt to describe the alien beauty of her lower limbs would sound grotesque, and she was not grotesque even in her unnamable shape, even in the utter weirdness of her face.

That clear, unwinking eye turned its gaze upon Smith. She lay there luxuriously upon her black couch, ivory-pale against the darkness of it, the indescribable strangeness of her body lolling with a serpent's grace upon the cushions. He felt the gaze of that eye go through him, searching out all the hidden places in his brain and flickering casually over the lifetime that lay behind him. The feathery crest quivered very gently above her head.

He met the gaze steadily. There was no expression upon that changeless face, for she could not smile, and the look in her single eye was meaningless to him. He had no way of guessing what emotions were stirring behind the alien mask. He had never realized before how essential is the mobility of the mouth in expressing moods, and hers was fixed, immobile, for ever stretched into its heart-shaped arch—like a lyre-frame, he thought, but irrevocably dumb, surely, for such a mouth as hers, in its immovable, unhinged jaw, could never utter human speech.

And then she spoke. The shock of it made him blink, and it was a moment before he realized just how she was accomplishing the impossible. The fluted tissue within the arched opening of her mouth had begun to vibrate like harp-strings, and the humming he had heard before went thrilling through the air. Beside him he was aware of Apri shuddering uncontrollably as the humming strengthened and swelled, but he was listening too closely to realize her save subconsciously; for there was in that humming something that—that, yes, it was rounding into the most queerly uttered phrases, in a sort of high, unutterably sweet singing note, like the sound of a violin. With her moveless lips she could not articulate, and her only enunciation came from the varied intensities of that musical tone.

Many languages could not be spoken so, but the High Venusian's lilt is largely that of inflection, every word-sound bearing as many meanings as it has degrees of intensity, so that the exquisitely modulated notes which came rippling from her harp-like mouth bore as clear a meaning as if she were enunciating separate words.

And it was more eloquent than speech. Somehow those singing phrases played upon other senses than the aural. From the first lilted note he recognized the danger of that voice. It vibrated, it thrilled, it caressed. It rippled up and down his answering nerves like fingers over harp-strings.

"Who are you, Earthman?" that lazy, nerve-strumming voice demanded. He felt, as he answered, that she knew not only his name but much more about him than he himself knew. Knowledge was in her eye, serene and all-inclusive.

"Northwest Smith," he said, a little sullenly. "Why have you brought me here?"

"A dangerous name," she hummed murmurously. "A dangerous man." There was an undernote of mockery in the music. "You were brought to feed the dwellers of Vonng with human blood, but I think—yes, I think I shall keep you for myself. You have known much of emotions that are alien to me, and I would share them fully, as one with your own strong, hot-blooded body, Northwest Smith. *Aie-e-e'*—the humming wailed along an ecstatic upward note that sent shivers down the man's spine—"and how sweet and hot your blood will be, my Earthman! You shall share my ecstasy as I drink it! You shall—but wait. First you must understand. Listen, Earthman."

The humming swelled to an inarticulate roaring in his ears, and somehow his mind relaxed under that sound, smoothed out, pliantly as wax for the recording of her voice. In that queer, submissive mood he heard her singing,

"Life dwells in so many overlapping planes, my Earthman, that even I can comprehend but a fraction of them. My plane is very closely akin to your own, and at some places they overlap in so intimate a way that it takes little effort to break through, if one can find a weak spot. This city of Vonng is one of the spots, a place which exists simultaneously in both planes. Can you understand that? It was laid out along certain obscure patterns in a way and for a purpose which are stories in themselves; so that in my own plane as well as here in yours Vonng's walls and streets and buildings are tangible. But time is different in our two worlds. It moves faster here. The strange alliance between your plane and mine, through two sorcerers of our alien worlds, was brought about very curiously. Vonng was built by men of your own plane, laboriously, stone by stone. But to us it seemed that through the magic of that sorcerer of ours a city suddenly appeared at his command, empty and complete. For your time moves so much faster than ours.

"And though through the magic of those strangely matched conspirators the stone which built Vonng existed in both planes at once, no power could make the men who dwelt in Vonng accessible to us. Two races simultaneously inhabited the city. To mankind it seemed haunted by nebulous, imponderable presences. That race was ourselves. To us you were tantalizingly perceptible in flashes, but we could not break through. And we wanted to very badly. Mentally, sometimes, we could reach you, but physically never.

"And so it went on. But because time moved faster here, your Vonng fell into ruins and has been deserted for ages,

while to our perceptions it is still a great and thronging city. I shall show you presently.

"To understand why I am here you must understand something of our lives. The goal of your own race is the pursuit of happiness, is it not so? But our lives are spent wholly in the experiencing and enjoyment of sensation. To us that is food and drink and happiness. Without it we starve. To nourish our bodies we must drink the blood of living creatures, but that is a small matter beside the ravenous hunger we know for the sensations and the emotions of the flesh. We are infinitely more capable of experiencing them than you, both physically and mentally. Our range of sensation is vast beyond your comprehension, but to us it is an old story, and always we seek new sensations, other alien emotions. We have raided many worlds, many planes, many dimensions, in search of something new. It was only a short while ago that we succeeded in breaking into yours, through the help of Apri here.

"You must understand that we could not have come had there not been a doorway. Ever since the building of Vonng we have been mentally capable of entering, but to experience the emotions we crave we must have physical contact, a temporary physical union through the drinking of blood. And there has never been a way to enter until we found Apri. You see, we have long known that some are born with a wider range of perceptions than their comrades can understand. Sometimes they are called mad. Sometimes in their madness they are more dangerous than they realize. For Apri was born with the ability to gaze in upon our world, and though she did not know this, or understand what the light was which she could summon up at will, she unwittingly opened the door for us to enter here.

"It was through her aid that I came, and with her aid that I maintain myself here and bring others through in the dark of the night to feed upon the blood of mankind. Our position is precarious in your world, and we have not yet dared make ourselves known. So we have begun upon the lowest types of man, to accustom ourselves to the fare and to strengthen our hold upon humanity, so that when we are ready to go forth openly we shall have sufficient power to withstand your resistance. But soon now we shall come."

The long, lovely, indescribable body upon the couch writhed round to front him more fully, the motion rippling along her limbs like a wavelet over water. The deep, steady gaze of the eye bored into his, the voice pulsed with intensity.

"Great things are waiting for you, Earthman—before you die. We shall become one, for a while. I shall savor all your perceptions, suck up the sensations you have known. I shall open new fields to you, and see them through your senses with a new flavor, and you shall share my delight in the taste of your newness. And as your blood flows you shall know all beauty, and all horror, and all delight and pain, and all the other emotions and sensations, nameless to you, that I have known."

The humming music of her voice spun through Smith's brain soothingly. Somehow what she said held no urgency for him. It was like a legend of something which had happened long ago to another man. He waited gravely as the voice went on again, dreamily, gloatingly,

"You have known much of danger, O wanderer. You have looked upon strange things, and life has been full for you,

and death an old comrade, and love—and love—those arms have held many women, is it not so? . . . Is it not so?"

Unbearably sweet, the voice lingered murmurously over the vibrant query, something compelling and irresistible in the question, in the pitch and the queer, ringing tone of it. And quite involuntarily memories flashed back across the surface of his mind. He was quiet, remembering.

THE milk-white girls of Venus are so lovely, with their sidelong eyes and their warm mouths and their voices pitched to the very tone of love. And the canal-women of Mars—coral pink, sweet as honey, murmurous under the moving moons. And Earth's girls are vibrant as sword-blades, and heady with kisses and laughter. There were others, too, He remembered a sweet brown savage on a lost asteroid, and one brief, perfume-dizzied night under the reeling stars. And there had been a space-pirate's wench in stolen jewels, flame-gun belted, who came to him in a camp-town on the edge of Martian civilization, where the drylands begin. There was that rosy Martian girl in the garden palace by the canal, where the moons went wheeling through the sky. . . . And once, very long ago, in a garden upon Earth—he closed his eyes and saw again the moonlight of home silvering a fair, high head, and level eyes looking into his and a mouth that quivered, saying——

He drew a long, unsteady breath and opened his eyes again. The pale steel stare of them was expressionless, but that last, deep-buried memory had burnt like a heat-ray, and he knew she had tasted the pain of it, and was exulting. The feathery crest that swept backward from her forehead was trembling rhythmically, and the colors blowing through it had deepened in intensity and were changing with bewildering swiftness. But her moveless face had not changed, although he thought there was a softening in the brilliance of her eye, as if she were remembering too.

When she spoke, the sustained, fluting note of her voice was breathless as a whisper, and he realized anew how infinitely more eloquent it was than a voice which spoke in words. She could infuse into the vibrant lilt blood-stirring intensities and soft, rich purrs that went sweeping along his nerves like velvet. His whole body was responding to the pitch of her voice. She was playing upon him as upon a harp, evoking chords of memory and sending burring thrills down his back and setting the blood athrob in his pulses by the very richness and deepness of her tone. And it strummed not only upon the responses of his body but also upon the chords of his very mind, waking thoughts to match her own, compelling him into the channels she desired. Her voice was purest magic, and he had not even the desire to resist it.

"They are sweet memories—sweet?" she purred caressingly. "The women of the worlds you know—the women who have lain in those arms of yours—whose mouths have clung to yours—do you remember?"

There was the most flagrant mesmerism in her voice as it ran on vibrantly over him—again he thought of fingers upon harp-strings—evoking the melodies she desired, strumming at his memories with words like hot, sweet flames. The room misted before his eyes, and that singing voice was a lilt through timeless space, no longer speaking in phrases but in a throbbingly inarticulate purr, and his body was no more than a sounding-board for the melodies she played.

Presently the mesmerism of her tone

took on a different pitch. The humming resolved itself into words again, thrilling through him now more clearly than spoken phrases.

"And in all these remembered women" —it sang—"in all these you remember me. . . . For it was I in each of them whom you remember—that little spark that was myself—and I am all women who love and are loved—my arms held you—do you not remember?"

In the midst of that hypnotic murmuring he did remember, and recognized dimly through the reeling tumult of his blood some great, veiled truth he could not understand.

The crest above her forehead trembled in slow, languorous rhythm, and rich colors flowed through it in tints that caressed the eyes—velvety purples, red like embers, flame colors and sunset shades. When she rose upon her couch with an unnamable gliding movement and held out her arms he had no recollection of moving forward, but somehow he was clasping her and the outstretched arms had coiled like serpents about him, and very briefly the heart-shaped orifice which was her mouth brushed against his lips.

Something icy happened then. The touch was light and fluttering, as if the membrane that lined that bowed and rigid opening had vibrated delicately against his mouth as swiftly and lightly as the brush of humming-birds' wings. It was not a shock, but somehow with the touch all the hammering tumult within him died. He was scarcely aware that he possessed a body. He was kneeling upon the edge of Julhi's couch, her arms like snakes about him, her weird, lovely face upturned to his. Some half-formed nucleus of rebellion in his mind dissipated in a breath, for her single eye was a magnet to draw his gaze, and once his pale stare was fixed upon it there was no possibility of escape.

And yet the eye did not seem to see him. It was fixed and glowing upon something immeasurably distant, far in the past, so intently that there was no consciousness in it of the walls about them, nor of himself so near, staring into the lucid depths wherein vague, cloudy reflections were stirring, queer shapes and shadows which were the images of nothing he had ever seen before.

He bent there, tense, his gaze riveted upon the moving shadows in her eye. A thin, high humming fluted from her mouth in a monotone which compelled all his consciousness into one straight channel, and that channel the clouded deeps of her remembering eye. Now the past was moving more clearly through it, and he could see the shapes of things he had no name for stirring sluggishly across a background of dimness veiling still deeper pasts.

Then all the shapes and shadows ran together in a blackness like a vacuum, and the eye was no longer clear and lucid, but darker than sunless space, and far deeper . . . a dizzy deep that made his senses whirl. Vertigo came upon him overwhelmingly, and he reeled and somehow lost all hold upon reality, and was plunging, falling, whirling through the immeasurable, bottomless abysses of that dark.

Stars reeled all about him, streaks of light against a velvet black almost tangible in its utter dark. Slowly the lights steadied. His giddiness ceased, though the rush of his motion did not. He was being borne more swiftly than the wind through a dark ablaze with fixed points of brilliance, starry and unwinking. Gradually he became aware of himself, and knew without surprize that he was no

longer of flesh and blood, a tangible human creature, but something nebulous and diffused and yet of definite dimensions, freer and lither than the human form and light as smoke.

He was riding through the starry dark a something all but invisible even to his keen new eyes. That dark did not muffle him as it would have blinded a human being. He could see quite clearly, his eyes utilizing something other than light in their perception. But this dim thing he rode was no more than a blur even to the keenness of his dark-defying gaze.

The vague outlines of it which were all he could catch as they flashed and faded and formed again, were now of one shape and now of another, but most often that of some fabulous monster with heaven-spanning wings and a sinuous body trailing out to incredible length. Yet somehow he knew that it was not in reality any such thing. Somehow he knew it for the half-visible manifestation of a force without name, a force which streamed through this starry dark in long, writhing waves and tides, taking fantastic shapes as it flowed. And those shapes were controlled in a measure by the brain of the observer, so that he saw what he expected to see in the nebulous outlines of the dark.

The force buoyed him up with a heady exhilaration more intoxicating than wine. In long arcs and plunges he swept on through the spangled night, finding that he could control his course in some dim way he managed without understanding. It was as if he had wings spread out upon conflicting currents, and by the poise and beat of them rode the air more easily than a bird—yet he knew that his strange new body bore no wings.

For a long while he swept and curved and volplaned upon those forces which flowed invisibly through the dark, giddy with the intoxicating joy of flight. He was aware of neither up nor down in this starry void. He was weightless, disembodied, a joyous ghost breasting the air-currents upon unreal wings. Those points of light which flecked the blackness lay strewn in clusters and long winnowed swaths and strange constellations. They were not distant, like real stars, for sometimes he plunged through a swarm of them and emerged with the breathless sensation of one who has dived into a smother of foaming seas and risen again, yet the lights were intangible to him. That refreshing sensation was not a physical one, nor were the starry points real. He could see them, but that was all. They were like the reflections of something far away in some distant dimension, and though he swung his course straight through a clustering galaxy he did not disarrange a single star. It was his own body which diffused itself through them like smoke, and passed on gasping and refreshed.

As he swept on through the dark he began to find a tantalizing familiarity in the arrangement of some of those starry groups. There were constellations he knew . . . surely that was Orion, striding across the sky. He saw Beteleguese's redly glowing eye, and Rigel's cold blue blaze. And beyond, across gulfs of darkness, twin Sirius was spinning, blue-white against the black. The red glimmer in the midst of that wide swath of spangles must be Antares, and the great clustering galaxy that engulfed it—surely the Milky Way! He swerved upon the currents that bore him up, tilted wide, invisible pinions and plunged through its sparkling froth of stars, intoxicated with the space-devouring range of his flight. He spanned a billion light-years with one swoop, volplaned in a long steep curve across a universe. He looked for the tiny sun round which his native planets spun, and could

not find it in the wilderness of splendor through which he was plunging. It was a giddy and joyous thing to know that his body dwelt upon some light-point too small to be seen, while here in the limitless dark he soared heedlessly through a welter of constellations, defying time and space and matter itself. He must be swooping through some airy plane where distance and size were not measured in the terms he knew, yet upon whose darkness the reflections of familiar galaxies fell.

Then in his soaring course he swept on beyond the familiar stars, across an intervening gulf of dark, and into another spangled universe whose constellations traced strange and shining patterns across the sky. Presently he became aware that he was not alone. Outlined like wraiths against the blackness, other forms went plunging down the spaceways, sweeping in long curves upon currents of flowing force, plunging into smothers of starry brilliance and bursting through a-sparkle with it to go swinging on again down swooping arcs of darkness.

And then reluctantly he felt the exhilaration begin to fade. He fought against the force that was drawing him backward, clinging stubbornly to this new and intoxicating pleasure, but despite himself the vision was paling, the constellations fading. The dark rolled suddenly away, curtainwise, and with a jerk he was back again in Julhi's queerly walled room, solid and human once more, and Julhi's lovely and incredible body was pressing close to his, her magical voice humming again through his head.

It was a wordless humming she sang now, but it chose its pitch unerringly to play upon the nerves she sought, and his heart began to hammer and his breath came fast, and the noise of war was roaring in his ears. That singing was a Valkyrie battle-chant, and he heard the crash of conflict and the shouts of struggling men, smelled burnt flesh and felt the kick of the ray-gun's butt against his gripping hand. All the sensations of battle poured over him in unrelated disarray. He was aware of smoke and dust and the smell of blood, felt the pain of ray-burns and the bite of blades, tasted sweat and salt blood, knew again the feel of his fists crashing into alien faces, the heady surge of power through his long, strong body. The wild exhilaration of battle flamed through him in deepening waves to the sorcery of Julhi's song.

It grew stronger then, and more intense, until the physical sensation faded wholly and nothing was left but that soul-consuming ecstasy, and that in turn intensified until he no longer stood upon solid ground, but floated free through void again, pure emotion divorced from all hint of flesh. Then the void took nebulous shape around him, as he passed upward by the very intensity of his ecstasy into some higher land beyond the reach of any sense he possessed. For a while he floated through cloudy shapes of alien form and meaning. Little thrills of perception tingled through the calm of his exultation as he brushed by the misty things that peopled the cloudland to which he had penetrated. They came swifter, until that calm was rippled across and across with conflicting thrills and ecstasies that ran at cross-currents and tossed up little wavelets, and clashed together, and——

Everything spun dizzily and with breath-taking abruptness he leaned once more in Julhi's embrace. Her voice lilted through his brain,

"That was new! I've never gone so high before, or even suspected that such a place existed. But you could not have

endured that pitch of ecstasy longer, and I am not ready yet for you to die. Let us sing now of terror. . . ."

And as the tones that went humming over him shivered through his brain, dim horrors stirred in their sleep and lifted ghastly heads in the lowest depths of his consciousness to the awakening call of the music, and terror rippled along his nerves until the air dimmed about him again and he was fleeing unnamable things down endless vistas of insanity, with that humming to hound him along.

So it went. He ran the gamut of emotion over and over again. He shared the strange sensations of beings he had never dreamed existed. Some he recognized, but more he could not even guess at, nor from what far worlds their emotions had been pilfered, to lie hoarded in Julhi's mind until she evoked them again.

Faster they came, and faster. They blew over him in dizzy succession, unknown emotions, familiar ones, strange ones, freezingly alien ones, all hurrying through his brain in a blurred confusion, so that one merged into another and they two into a third before the first had done more than brush the surface of his consciousness. Faster still, until at last the whole insane tumult blended into a pitch of wild intensity which must have been too great for his human fiber to endure; for as the turmoil went on he felt himself losing all grasp upon reality, and catapulting upon the forces that ravaged him into a vast and soothing blankness which swallowed up all unrest in the nirvana of its dark.

After an immeasurable while he felt himself wakening, and fought against it weakly. No use. A light was broadening through that healing night which all his stubbornness could not resist. He had no sensation of physical awakening, but without opening his eyes he saw the room more clearly than he had ever seen it before, so that there were tiny rainbows of light around all the queer objects there, and Apri——

He had forgotten her until now, but with this strange awareness that was not of the eyes alone he saw her standing before the couch upon which he leaned in Julhi's arms. She stood rigid, rebellion making a hopeless mask of her face, and there was agony in her eyes. All about her like a bright nimbus the light rayed out. She was incandescent, a torch whose brilliance strengthened until the light radiating from her was almost palpable.

He sensed in Julhi's body, clinging to his, a deep-stirring exultation as the light swelled about her. She luxuriated in it, drank it in like wine. He felt that for her it was indeed tangible, and that he looked upon it now, in this queer new way, through senses that saw it as she did. Somehow he was sure that with normal eyes it would not have been visible.

Dimly he was remembering what had been said about the light which opened a door into Julhi's alien world. And he felt no surprize when it became clear to him that the couch no longer supported his body—that he had no body—that he was suspended weightlessly in midair, Julhi's arms still clasping him in a queer, unphysical grip, while the strangely banded walls moved downward all about him. He had no sensation of motion himself; yet the walls seemed to fall away below and he was floating freely past the mounting bands of mist that paled and brightened swiftly until he was bathed in the blinding light that ringed the top.

THERE was no ceiling. The light was a blaze of splendor all about him, and out of that blaze, very slowly, very nebulously, the streets of Vonng took shape. It was not that Vonng which had

stood once upon the little Venusian island. The buildings were the same as those which must once have risen where their ruins now stood, but there was a subtle distortion of perspective which would have made it clear to him, even had he not known, that this city stood in another plane of existence than his own. Sometimes amidst the splendor he thought he caught glimpses of vine-tangled ruins. A wall would shimmer before his eyes for an instant and crumble into broken blocks, and the pavement would be debris-strewn and mossy. Then the vision faded and the wall stood up unbroken again. But he knew he was looking through the veil which parted the two worlds so narrowly, upon the ruins which were all that remained of Vonng in his own plane.

It was the Vonng which had been shaped for the needs of two worlds simultaneously. He could see, without really understanding, how some of the queerly angled buildings and twisted streets which could have no meaning to the eyes of a man were patterned for the use of these gliding people. He saw in the pavement the curious medallions set by the long-dead sorcerers to pin two planes together at this point of intersection.

In these shimmering, unstable streets he saw for the first time in full light shapes which must be like that of the creature which had seized him in the dark. They were of Julhi's race, unmistakably, but he saw now that in her metamorphosis into a denizen of his own world she had perforce taken on a more human aspect than was normally her own. The beings that glided through Vonng's strangely altered streets could never have been mistaken, even at the first glance, as human. Yet they gave even more strongly than had Julhi the queer impression of being exquisitely fitted for some lofty purpose he could not guess at, their shapes of a perfect proportion toward which mankind might have aimed and missed. For the hint of humanity was there, as in man there is a hint of the beast. Julhi in her explanation had made them seem no more than sensation-eaters, intent only upon the gratification of hunger. But, looking upon their perfect, indescribable bodies, he could not believe that the goal for which they were so beautifully fashioned could be no more than that. He was never to know what that ultimate goal was, but he could not believe it only the satisfaction of the senses.

The shining crowds poured past him down the streets, the whole scene so unstable that great rifts opened in it now and again to let the ruins of that other Vonng show through. And against this background of beauty and uncertainty he was sometimes aware of Apri, rigid and agonized, a living torch to light him on his way. She was not in the Vonng of the alien plane nor in that of the ruins, but somehow hung suspended between the two in a dimension of her own. And whether he moved or not, she was always there, dimly present, radiant and rebellious, the shadow of a queer, reluctant madness behind her tortured eyes.

In the strangeness of what lay before him he scarcely heeded her, and he found that when he was not thinking directly of the girl she appeared only as a vague blur somewhere in the back of his consciousness. It was a brain-twisting sensation, this awareness of overlapping planes. Sometimes in flashes his mind refused to encompass it and everything shimmered meaninglessly for an instant before he could get control again.

Julhi was beside him. He could see her without turning. He could see a great many strange things here in a great many

queer, incomprehensible ways. And though he felt himself more unreal than a dream, she was firm and stable with a different sort of substance from that she had worn in the other Vonng. Her shape was changed too. Like those others she was less human, less describable, more beautiful even than before. Her clear, unfathomable eye turned to him limpidly. She said,

"This is my Vonng," and it seemed to him that though her humming thrilled compellingly through the smoky immaterialism which was himself, her words, in some new way, had gone directly from brain to brain with no need of that pseudo-speech to convey them. He realized then that her voice was primarily not for communication, but for hypnosis —a weapon more potent than steel or flame.

She turned now and moved away over the tiled street, her gait a liquidly graceful gliding upon those amazing lower limbs. Smith found himself drawn after her with a power he could not resist. He was smokily impalpable and without any independent means of locomotion, and he followed her as helplessly as her shadow followed.

At a corner ahead of them a group of the nameless beings had paused in the onward sweep which was carrying so many of Vonng's denizens along toward some yet unseen goal. They turned as Julhi approached, their expressionless eyes fixed on the shadow-wraith behind her which was Smith. No sound passed between them, but he felt in his increasingly receptive brain faint echoes of thoughts that were flashing through the air. It puzzled him until he saw how they were communicating—by those exquisitely feathery crests which swept backward above their foreheads.

It was a speech of colors. The crests quivered unceasingly, and colors far beyond the spectrum his earthly eyes could see blew through them in bewildering sequence. There was a rhythm about it that he gradually perceived, though he could not follow it. By the vagrant echoes of their thoughts which he could catch he realized that the harmony of the colors reflected in a measure the harmony of the two minds which produced them. He saw Julhi's crest quiver with a flush of gold, and those of the rest were royally purple. Green flowed through the gold, and a lusciously rosy tinge melted through the purple of the rest. But all this took place faster than he could follow, and before he was aware of what was happening a discord in the thoughts that sounded in his mind arose, and while Julhi's crest glowed orange those of the rest were angrily scarlet.

Violence had sprung up between them, whose origin he could not quite grasp though fragments of their quarrel flashed through his brain from each of the speakers, and wildly conflicting colors rippled through the plumes. Julhi's ran the gamut of a dozen spectra in tints that were eloquent of fury. The air quivered as she turned away, drawing him after her. He was at a loss to understand the suddenness of the rage which had swept over her so consumingly, but he could catch echoes of it vibrating through his mind from her own hot anger. She flashed on down the street with blurring swiftness, her crest trembling in swift, staccato shivers.

She must have been too furious to notice where she went, for she had plunged now straight into that streaming crowd which poured through the streets, and before she could win free again the force of it had swallowed her up. She had no desire to join the torrent, and Smith

could feel her struggling violently against it, the fury rising as her efforts to be free were vain. Colors like curses raved through her trembling crest.

But the tide was too strong for her. They were carried along irresistibly past the strangely angled buildings, over the patterned pavements, toward an open space which Smith began to catch glimpses of through the houses ahead of them. When they reached the square it was already nearly filled. Ranks of crested, gliding creatures thronged it, their one-eyed faces, heart-mouths immobile, were lifted toward a figure on a dais in the center. He sensed in Julhi a quivering of hatred as she faced that figure, but in it he thought he saw a serenity and a majesty of bearing which even Julhi's indescribable and lovely presence did not have. The rest waited in packed hundreds, eyes fixed, crests vibrating.

When the square was filled he watched the being on the dais lift undulant arms for quiet, and over the crowd a rigid stillness swept. The feathery crests poised motionless above intent heads. Then the plume of the leader began to vibrate with a curious rhythm, and over all the crowd the antenna-like plumes quivered in unison. Every ripple of that fronded crest was echoed to the last shiver by the crowd. There was something infinitely stirring in the rhythm. Obscurely it was like the beat of marching feet, the perfect timing of a dance. They were moving faster now, and the colors that swept through the leader's crest were echoed in those of the crowd. There was no opposition of contrast or complement here; the ranks followed their leader's harmonies in perfect exactitude. His thoughts were theirs.

Smith watched an exquisitely tender rose shiver through that central crest, darken to crimson, sweep on through richness of deepening tones beyond infrared and mount in an eloquence of sheer color that stirred his being, even though he could not understand. He realized the intense and rising emotion which swept the crowd as the eloquence of the leader went vibrating through their senses.

He could not have shared that emotion, or understood a fraction of what was taking place, but as he watched, something gradually became clear to him. There was a glory about them. These beings were not innately the sensation-hungry vampires Julhi had told him of. His instinct had been right. No one could watch them in their concerted harmony of emotion and miss wholly the lofty ardor which stirred them now. Julhi must be a degenerate among them. She and her followers might represent one side of these incomprehensible people, but it was a baser side, and not one that could gain strength among the majority. For he sensed sublimity among them. It thrilled through his dazzled brain from that intent, worshipping crowd about him.

And knowing this, rebellion suddenly surged up within him, and he strained in awakening anger at the mistiness which held him impotent. Julhi felt the pull. He saw her turn, anger still blazing in her crest and her single eye glowing with a tinge of red. From her rigid lips came a furious hissing, and colors he could not name rippled through the plume in surges eloquent of an anger that burned like a heat-gun's blast. Something in the single-minded ardor of the crowd, the message of the orator, must have fanned the flame of her rage, for at the first hint of rebellion in her captive she turned suddenly upon the crowd which hemmed her in and began to shoulder her way free.

They did not seem to realize her presence or feel the force of her pushing

them aside. Devoutly all eyes were riveted upon the leader, all the feathery crests vibrated in perfect unison with his own. They were welded into an oblivious whole by the power of his eloquence. Julhi made her way out of the thronged square without distracting a single eye.

SMITH followed like a shadow behind her, rebellious but impotent. She swept down the angled streets like a wind of fury. He was at a loss to understand the consuming anger which blazed higher with every passing moment, though there were vague suspicions in his mind that he must have guessed rightly as he watched the crested orator's effect upon the throng—that she was indeed degenerate, at odds with the rest, and hated them the more fiercely for it.

She swept him on along deserted streets whose walls shimmered now and again into green-wreathed ruins, and took shape again. The ruins themselves seemed to flicker curiously with dark and light that swept over them in successive waves, and suddenly he realized that time was passing more slowly here than in his own plane. He was watching night and day go by over the ruins of that elder Vonng.

They were coming now into a courtyard of strange, angular shape. As they entered, the half-forgotten blur at the back of his mind which was Apri glowed into swift brilliance, and he saw that the light which streamed from her was bathing the court in radiance, stronger than the light outside. He could see her vaguely, hovering over the exact center of the courtyard in that curious dimension of her own, staring with mad, tortured eyes through the veils of the planes between. About the enclosure shapes like Julhi's moved sluggishly, the colors dull on their crests, their eyes filmed. And he saw, now that a suspicion of the truth had entered his mind, that Julhi herself did not have quite the clear and shining beauty of those who had thronged the square. There was an indescribable dullness over her.

When she and her shadowy captive entered the court those aimlessly moving creatures quickened into sudden life. A scarlet the color of fresh blood flowed through Julhi's crest, and the others echoed it with eager quiverings of their plumes which were somehow obscene and avid. And for the first time Smith's dulled consciousness awoke into fear, and he writhed helplessly in the recesses of his mind away from the hungry shapes around him. The crowd was rushing forward now with quivering plumes and fluttering, wide-arched mouths that had flushed a deeper crimson as if in anticipation. For all their strangeness, their writhing shapes and weird, alien faces, they were like wolves bearing down hungrily upon their quarry.

But before they reached him something happened. Somehow Julhi had moved with lightning swiftness, and vertigo seized Smith blindingly. The walls around them shimmered and vanished, Apri vanished, the light blazed into a dazzle and he felt the world shifting imponderably about him. Scenes he recognized flashed and faded—the black ruins he had awakened in, Julhi's cloud-walled room, the wilderness of pillars, this curiously shaped courtyard itself, all melted together and blurred and faded. In the instant before it vanished he felt, as from far away, the touch upon the mistiness of his bodiless self of hands that were not human, hands that stung with the shock of lightning.

Somehow in the timeless instant while this took place he realized that he had been snatched away from the pack for some obscure purpose. Somehow, too, he

knew that what Apri had told him had been true, though he had thought her mad at the time. In some vague way all these scenes were the same. They occupied the same place, at the same time—ruined Vonng, the Vonng that Julhi knew, all those places he had known since he met Apri in the dark—they were overlapping planes through which, as through open doors, Julhi had drawn him.

He was aware of an innominable sensation then, within himself, and the mistiness which had prisoned him gave way before the returning strength of his flesh-and-blood body. He opened his eyes. Something was clinging to him in heavy coils, and a pain gnawed at his heart, but he was too stunned at what surrounded him to heed it just then.

He stood among the ruins of a court which must once, long ago, have been the court he had just left—or had he? For he saw now that it too surrounded him, flickering through the ruins in glimpses of vanished splendor. He stared round wildly. Yes, shining through the crumbled walls and the standing walls that were one and the same, he could catch glimpses of that columned wilderness through which he had wandered. And rising above this, one with it, the misty-walled chamber where he had met Julhi. They were all here, occupying the same space, at the same time. The world was a chaos of conflicting planes all about him. There were other scenes too, intermingling with these, places he had never seen before. And Apri, incandescent and agonized, peered with mad eyes through the bewildering tangle of worlds. His brain lurched sickeningly with the incredible things it could not comprehend.

Around him through the chaotic jumbling of a score of planes prowled strange forms. They were like Julhi—yet unlike her. They were like those figures which had rushed upon him in that other Vonng—but not wholly. They had bestialized in the metamorphosis. The shining beauty was dulled. The incomparable grace of them had thickened into animal gropings. Their plumes burned with an ugly crimson and the clarity of their eyes was clouded now with a blind and avid hunger. They circled him with a baffled gliding.

All this he was aware of in the flashing instant when his eyes opened. Now he looked down, for the first time consciously aware of that pain which gnawed at his heart, of the clinging arms. And suddenly that pain stabbed like a heat-ray, and he went sick with the shock of what he saw. For Julhi clung to him, relaxed in avid coils. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth was fastened tightly against the flesh of his left breast, just over the heart. The plume above her head quivered from base to tip with long, voluptuous shudders, and all the shades of crimson and scarlet and bloody rose that any spectrum ever held went blowing through it.

Smith choked on a word half-way between oath and prayer, and with shaking hands ripped her arms away, thrust against her shoulders blindly to tear loose that clinging, agonizing mouth. The blood spurted as it came free. The great eye opened and looked up into his with a dull, glazed stare. Swiftly the glaze faded, the dullness brightened into a glare behind which hell-fires flamed scorchingly, to light up the nameless hells within. Her plume whipped erect and blazed into angry red. From the arched mouth, wet now, and crimson, a high, thin, nerve-twanging hum shrilled agonizingly.

That sound was like the flick of a wire whip on raw flesh. It bit into his brain-

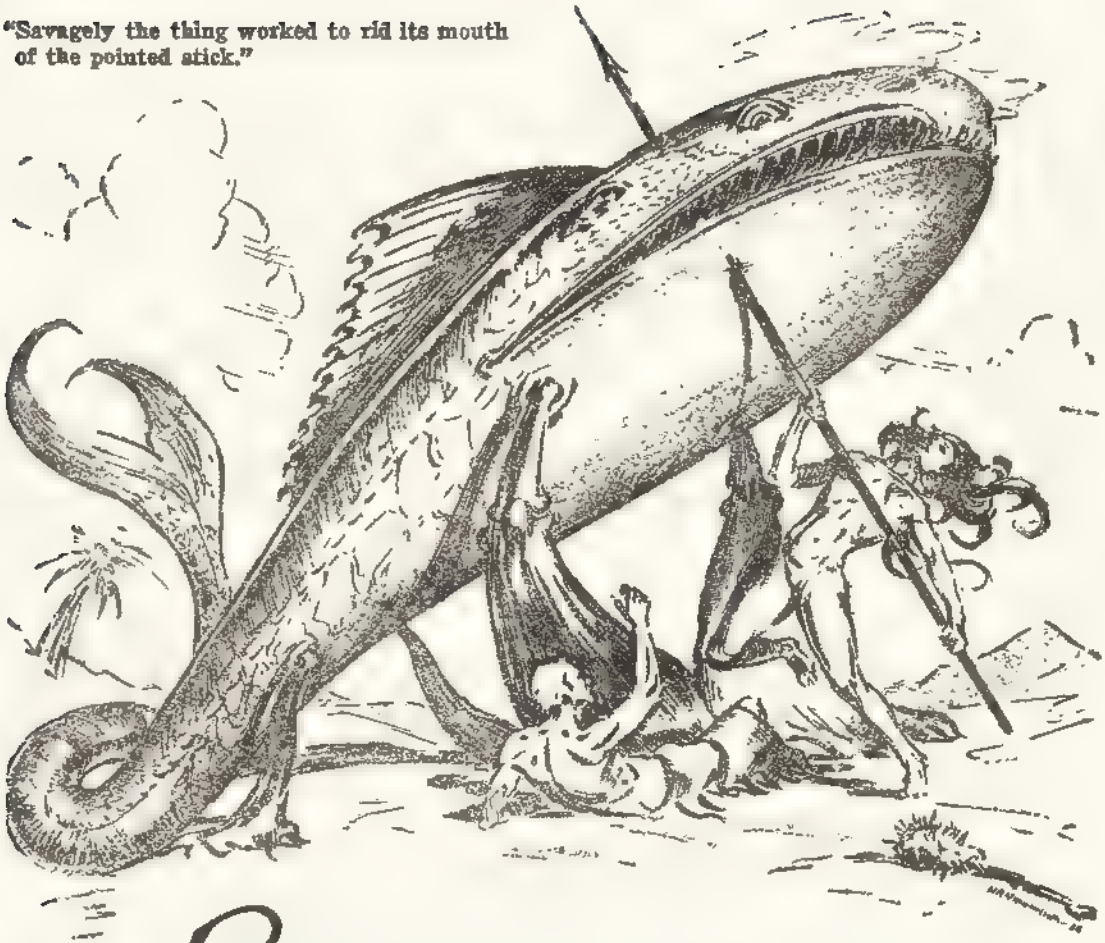
centers, sawed at his quivering nerves excruciatingly, unbearably. Under the lash of that voice Smith wrenched away from her clinging arms, stumbling over the stones, blundering anywhere away from the punishing shrill of that hum. The chaos spun about him, scenes shifting and melting together maddeningly. The blood ran down his breast.

Through his blind agony, as the world dissolved into shrilling pain, one thing alone was clear. That burning light. That steady flame. Apri. He was blundering unimpeded through solid walls and columns and buildings in their jumble of cross-angled planes, but when he came to her at last she was tangible, she was real. And with the feel of her firm flesh under his hands a fragment of sanity rose out of that piercing anguish which shivered along his nerves. Dully he knew that through Apri all this was possible. Apri the light-maker, the doorway between worlds. . . . His fingers closed on her throat.

Blessedly, blessedly that excruciating song was fading. He knew no more than that. He scarcely realized that his fingers were sunk yet in the softness of a woman's throat. The chaos was fading around him, the crazy planes righting themselves, paling, receding backward into infinity. Through their fragments the solid rocks of Vonng loomed up in crumbling ruins. The agony of Julhi's song was a faint shrilling from far away. And about him in the air he sensed a frenzied tugging, as if impalpable hands were clutching at his, ghostly arms pulling ineffectually upon him. He looked up, dazed and uncertain.

Where Julhi had stood among the tumbling planes an expanding, cloudy image hovered now, bearing still the lovely outlines that had been hers, but foggy, spreading and dissipating like mist as the doorway closed between planes. She was scarcely more than a shadow, and fading with every breath, but she wrenched at him yet with futile, cloudy hands, striving to the last to preserve her gate into the world she hungered for. But as she clawed she was vanishing. Her outlines blurred and melted as smoke fades. She was no more than a darkening upon the air now, tenuous, indistinguishable. In less time than it takes to tell, the fog that had been lovely Julhi had expanded into nothingness—the air was clear.

Smith looked down, shook his dulled head a little, bent to what he still gripped between his hands. It needed no more than a glance, but he made sure before he released his grasp. Pity clouded his eyes for an instant—Apri was free now, in the freedom she had longed for, the madness gone, the terrible danger that was herself banished. Never again through that gate would Julhi and her followers enter. The door was closed.



"Savagely the thing worked to rid its mouth of the pointed stick."

Rulers of the Future

By PAUL ERNST

The story of an incredible race of monsters that rule over mankind hundreds of million years from now.

The Story Thus Far

PLANNING a trip to Alpha Centauri, the nearest star to our solar system, the astronomers Ticknor and Brock find themselves thwarted by a rival scientist, Gorse, who calls in the police to prevent what he calls certain suicide. While Brock and a newspaper reporter named Raymond Woodward hold off the police, Professor Ticknor makes his calculations and points the space-ship toward Alpha Centauri; and the three men tumble into the craft and are launched on their voyage through space.

Owing to haste in making his calculations, Ticknor aims the space-shell wrongly, and the space-travellers find that they have travelled in a huge circle and have come back to their starting-point. The voyage has taken several hundred million years; but, since they have travelled with the speed of light, by which absolute

time is measured, the journey seems to them as if it were instantaneous, and they have grown no older.

They find the land-surface of the globe covered with ice, for the Earth is gripped in the frozen clutch of a glacial epoch. They land in a green oasis in the ice-fields where was once the Sahara Desert.

Leaving the space-shell to explore the oasis, they are gripped by the tentacle-like tendrils of a man-eating tree with purple flowers, from which they are rescued by the people of the oasis. These are kind-hearted, primitive folk, without weapons of any kind, and with few tools. They are beset by a haunting fear of the beings who rule them, and for whom they collect great quantities of fish. These rulers collect the tribute of fish every thirty-five days, and usually take one or more of the humans with them to feed their "god".

A number of the rulers arrive to collect the tribute, and cut the scientists off from their space-shell. They are lizard-men, resembling enormous crocodiles, walking on two legs and possessing an articulate language and brains of good intellectual capacity. The rulers take the three men with them, together with Gayta, a girl of the oasis, to feed to their "god". They first wreck the time-machine of the space-shell.

Woodward tells Gayta to instruct all her people how to make wooden spears and harden their points by fire. Meanwhile the three men are thrown into a pool as sacrifices to the lizard-men's "god" —a terrible creature like an incredibly enormous octopus. Ticknor throws a steel-jacketed trinitele bullet into the creature's mouth, and the resulting explosion shatters the "god".

The men make their escape through underground caverns inhabited by enormous snakes, but when they emerge in the daylight Ticknor is no longer with them. After a fruitless search for Ticknor, the two are attacked by a small company of the lizard-men, from whom they are rescued by Gayta and a contingent of the forest folk, armed with the wooden spears.

The story continues:

13

WE REACHED Gayta's village next noon, and found it a seething beehive of activity. Thirty-four hundred men (the count taken later on the fighting list we made) were camped in a place that till now had contained only the few hundred men, women and children of the village.

The reception they gave Brock and me was a flattering one. The folk of the village who already knew us crowded up to touch us shyly as if to make sure we were flesh and blood and not ghosts. The newcomers, who seemed to have heard something to the effect that we were minor gods ourselves, actually bowed down to us as they acknowledged our leadership over them.

In every face we saw fierce gayety, and sure purpose. These forest people were apparently as certain of winning the coming war against the lizard-men as though the battle were already fought and won!

It was a marvelous example of how tyrannically an idea can enslave a people —how propaganda can bind a race more surely than steel chains. For generations the humans in this island in the ice had been told that the lizard-men's god made the lizard-men unbeatable. For generations the fear of that ominous god had kept them from rising against their monstrous masters. Now they were told the god was dead—and they swarmed to fight their saurian masters. Same number of lizard-men to fight; same conditions;

only the death of an idea to rouse them to revolt.

Their optimism was a fine asset, with a struggle to the death approaching all of us. But Brock and I did not quite share it.

"True," he summed it up, "we outnumber the things nearly twenty to one. And back in the woods there, about eighty humans killed twenty of the monsters at a cost of less than half their own number. But the coming fight won't be like the one in the woods."

He ticked off the differences on his fingers.

"First, we will be attacking a city; the lizard-men will be behind fortifications from which we will have to dislodge them.

"Second, they can get along without food for longer periods of time than we can; which means that if we can not storm their city at once we will have to split our force in half—one half to fight and the other to find food for the lot of us.

"Third, the lizard-men will no doubt have some sort of arms themselves. They're intelligent enough to have some kind of weapons held in reserve for this very thing: a revolt of their slaves."

"On the food proposition," I began hopefully. "There's an idea there. Couldn't we simply surround the mound city and starve them out?"

Brock shook his head. "Don't you remember? Three fair-sized rivers run through the city, not counting the one that empties into the black pool. They could fish those for enough starvation-rations to last a long time."

The exultant chattering and shouting of the men in the camp came to our ears. Brock sighed.

"Fine spirit—fine morale," he said. "But I'm afraid a great many of them will never live to see next week's sun. Hello—what's this?"

We had been holding the above talk in a large bark hut set aside for our use. Now three men stooped to enter the doorway, and respectfully approached us. After them came Gayta, her eyes shining.

"We have held a great meeting," she said, "and in it we have elected you our leaders, not only in fighting, but afterward when the fighting is done. These men have come to ask if you will rule over us and all the land when the lizard-men are killed."

Brock and I looked at each other. "Nice jobs—if they last," he said in English.

We accepted, of course. King! It has a nice sound. We would be twin kings over thousands of people with a domain as large as one of our own former states. If——

We dismissed fantasy, and got to practical things, the first of which were hasty training of our army and preparation of a plan of attack.

We split the thirty-four hundred men into two forces; and subdivided these, in turn, into bands of one hundred each, with chosen men to lead each band. Then we trained for two days in formation and use of arms. We drilled the men in attack—where they would march shoulder to shoulder with spear-points presenting an unbroken and deadly line. And we drilled them in defense, where they were to ground their spears at a forty-five degree forward slant.

During this time we kept an alert and far-flung guard duty, lest the lizard-men surprize us by attacking first. But no sign of them was seen. Either they were still unaware of the movement forming against them, or their continuing lethargy from the feasting was keeping them at home.

On the morning of the third day we started our march. We made a brave showing — thirty-four hundred fighting-men, spears over shoulders at a martial slant, and about five hundred women who had insisted on coming along to care for the wounded and prepare food. Among the latter was Gayta, but she didn't stay among them often; she was constantly by my side.

The hope that filled the hearts of all was that the lizard-men would be taken completely by surprize. Now that their god was dead, and its omnipotent mind-reading powers denied the monsters, how would they know rebellion was being planned?

But Brock and I took little stock in that. We were too convinced of the truth of our first theory: that the lizard-men had never been informed of uprisings by their god, but by the spy duties of certain contemptible humans ever ready to curry favor by betraying their fellows. It was probable that some of these spies had reported the coming attack days before now, and that the lizard-men were prepared for our charge.

The hours passed as we streamed through the forests toward the mound city. And at length, as it became obvious that we would meet with no resistance till we had reached the dome city itself, I turned over my army to the intelligent, stalwart little man I'd picked as my immediate subordinate, and dropped behind with Gayta. I might never come out of the forthcoming struggle alive; and I wanted a last hour or two alone with my little beauty of the blue wood-flower.

Insensibly we lagged farther and farther behind, till the forest where we walked was still, echoing no longer to the noise of thousands of marching men.

We talked little as we walked between the majestic trees, over the springy, turf-smooth ground. There was a lot to be said, but strangely we found it required few words.

We came to one of the gem-like little lakes, and started around its shore in the trail of the rest. And then I was treated to one of the weirdest sights I'd seen since we landed here.

Ahead of us, a few yards offshore, the water suddenly rippled and heaved as some large thing neared the top. Gayta and I stopped, fearing it might be one of the lizard-men. But it was not a saurian head that finally thrust up from the waters of the lake.

It was a fish head. Something like a shark's head. There was a long, pointed snout, with a gash of a mouth underneath like a shark's mouth. The mouth, which opened and closed rhythmically, was studded all over with teeth about two inches long.

Farther and farther the head and torpedo-shaped body rose from the water, while the fish eyes, bright orange with dull blue pupils, regarded us. Then the thing propelled itself through the water toward us, and began to climb out on shore on four flapper-like fins.

"What in heaven's name is it?" I half whispered to Gayta, as we backed along the shore away from the advancing, twenty-foot thing that so resembled a walking shark.

"It is a sarregg," she whispered back. "I have heard of them, but never before have I seen one. They are very rare."

"And very unattractive-looking," I added, glancing again at the ferocious, toothed mouth that was snapping after us as we slowly retreated.

Another instance of how cold-blooded life had ascended the scale of evolution, I mused. This species had changed fins for flippers that had eventually grown strong enough to support its weight on

land like legs. Its gill structure, too, no doubt, had altered radically to allow it to breathe air for short periods away from its native element. Given enough more millions of years it might become wholly a land animal. . . .

At this point my reflections were abruptly turned to amazement—an amazement which was quickly succeeded by deadly fear.

The thing had looked clumsy on those formless flippers, waddling awkwardly as a seal waddles on dry land. I didn't dream it could move quickly. Neither did Gayta; and both of us had kept only a few yards from its pointed snout in our slow retreat away from it.

But though it looked clumsy it could move with lightning speed. Without seeming to gather itself in any way for a leap, it suddenly lunged at us like a thunderbolt.

Gayta screamed and leaped aside. I essayed the same move—but my foot turned on a stone, and I fell in front of the giant fish.

"Wodewah!" I heard Gayta's despairing shriek. Then the torpedo shape was on me, the tooth-studded mouth gaping for my head.

I heard flying feet beside me, saw Gayta pick up the spear I'd dropped. Next instant she had thrust the spear up into the roof of that cavernous mouth as it snapped shut.

The great jaws stopped half-way open as the lower jaw forced the spear-point clear up through the pointed snout. Savagely the thing worked to rid its mouth of the pointed stick, but not so savagely that it didn't see me try to roll away from it.

Like a cat's paw, one great flipper came crushingly down on me, to hold me while the fish tried to spew out the agonizingly placed spear.

Unable to move a muscle under the crushing weight of the monster's flipper, I could only stare up at the dripping, ferocious jaws. How soon would the rapidly splintering spear be broken off, allowing the great jaws to close without that excruciating pain? Or—how soon would they close anyhow, pain drowned in growing, cold-blooded fury?

I heard Gayta scream again, crying for help. But I only heard her faintly. Unconsciousness, that blessed anesthetic administered by Nature herself in too painful crises, was closing down over me. I ceased to feel the weight that crushed me down, ceased to see the huge jaws worrying with the fast splintering spear.

I fainted.

14

In order to keep this history more or less in order, I will have to go back a bit at this point, back to the moment when Brock and I reached the end of the tunnel leading from the black pool—and found that Professor Ticknor was no longer with us. I tell this part of his story, to the place where it branched back into the main stream of our destinies, just as he told it to me.

When the three of us saw that blessed daylight, after leaving the cave of the snakes, Brock and I drew a little ahead of Ticknor in the race for it. He was not as young as we; and the long distance we had come, wading against the current every foot of the way, had badly winded him.

We did not notice that we were leaving him behind. And, as the distance was only a dozen yards or so between us, Ticknor did not call out.

It never occurred to him that there might be more dangers threatening us before we left the tunnel for upper earth. Also it never occurred to him to be care-

ful where he planted his feet. He saw that Brock and I were striding along evenly, and assumed that the creek bed was level from wall to wall.

He must have walked off the line we followed, however, for he suddenly stepped into a deep hole in the creek bed that we had missed, and went down.

There was no time for him to cry out. At one moment he was running along after us in waist-high water; at the next he was down and over his head, floundering to get back to the surface.

Still he was not alarmed, only confused. But that confusion grew into a deadly fear an instant later.

Something suddenly clamped around his ankle and started drawing him down to even greater depths.

That something felt gruesomely like a hand—but a hand of iron, a hand with strength such as no human ever had.

Ticknor fought with all his failing strength to break loose, and to claw his way back to the top. His lungs, straining for the air denied them, felt as though they must burst. There was a roaring in his ears, bursting light before his eyes.

Involuntarily his mouth opened at last and his starving lungs gulped for oxygen. The strangling water filled them, and he knew all the horror of drowning.

A long time later he opened his eyes, to become aware that someone was giving him a crude first-aid treatment. He was lying face down over a smooth boulder, while hands pressed against his back in an effort to free his lungs of water.

He finally coughed; and the noise was a signal for the massaging and pounding to stop. A soft hand gripped his shoulder and helped him to turn over and finally to sit up.

He found himself staring stupidly into the face of a strikingly handsome woman —quite evidently one of the forest folk.

Even at the time, he noticed that her face was terribly pale and drawn, and that her eyes were glazed with terror. But her first words were unselfish ones.

"Are you all right now?"

Ticknor managed to gasp out that he was. Meanwhile he was gazing into her clear, beautiful eyes with growing wonder.

Surely *this* wasn't the being that had trapped him in the creek and dragged him here! Surely that hand wasn't the one that had clamped his ankle in a grip of steel, to hold him under water until he could struggle no longer!

"You——"

"We're both prisoners," the woman anticipated his question. She whispered the words, and glanced fearfully over her shoulder as she spoke.

Ticknor looked around. It was very dark. More by instinct than by actual eyesight, he could make out that he was in another cave—like that of the snakes but smaller. There was only a little, here, of the phosphorescent stuff that had lit the other cavern so brightly.

His gaze went back to the woman's white, set face, a dim blur in the murky dusk.

"How did you get here?"

"I was swept down from the forest above," she said. "A friend and I were wading across the stream that leads in here. We were crossing just above the spot where the water plunges down into a hole in the earth. We stepped into a deep place, and were dashed over the fall before we could get to shallow water again. Outside, in the dark where the stream runs underground, we were caught as you were caught. We were held under water till we ceased to struggle, and were then brought here." She shuddered. "I . . . I was all right. I but held my breath, feigning stillness. But my friend——"

She pointed. Ticknor saw another woman. But this one was lying in a piti-

ful sprawl on the rock. All his rescuer's skill had not brought back life to her.

"But what dragged us here?" Ticknor asked at this point. "The great serpents?"

"No."

"The lizard-men?"

"They are not lizard-men. But they are very like them."

"Where are they now?"

"They have all gone out to the stream to fish for more humans. I think it has been a long time since so much warm-blooded food came down the black stream they live by."

TICKNOR was very much recovered by now. He felt weak and sick; but he got to his feet, and even tottered about a few steps.

Then he saw the mouth of the cavern, and heard rushing water just outside it. This cave immediately adjoined the tunnel he had been traversing, as a black room might adjoin an even blacker corridor.

He glanced eagerly at the woman, and then at the exit. But she shook her head hopelessly.

"They—our captors—are just outside. And they have great eyes that see in the dark. We could never slip past them."

She stared at Ticknor intently in the dimness. "You are one of the three who came from the sky?"

Ticknor nodded.

"Ah! What a misfortune! Our people need you to lead us in the fight against our masters. Yet you must die here in this deep, secret place. . . . Ssh!"

Ticknor stared at the exit, his gaze following hers. Their captors, the creatures that had trapped them and brought them to this grim lair, were coming back from the stream.

At first, as Ticknor saw them in the dimness, he thought he had misunderstood the woman and that the things were lizard-men after all. But as they came closer he saw the curious truth.

The things of the cave were comparable to the lizard-men as prehistoric man is comparable to civilized man. They were, in a word, the evolutionary ancestors of the lizard-men, of the same parent stock, but far, far lower in the scale.

Their crocodilian jaws were longer and sharper, and their teeth larger. Their tails dragged on the ground, and now and then one of their number dropped to all fours, resembling for all the world an ordinary crocodile crawling on a river bank. Their eyes were different, too; at least four inches in diameter and gleaming dimly with a sheen of their own in the darkness to which they had grown accustomed.

Yet the things, abysmal as they were, had reached the state where they obeyed some vague community interest. That was indicated by the fact that they had dragged the humans there to be shared by all instead of devouring them on the spot, as they caught them in the stream.

Croaking incoherently, the primitive caricatures of the lizard-men stalked toward their captives. Neither surprize nor emotion of any sort was displayed at the discovery that two out of three of their victims were still alive.

Ticknor's hand went out to grasp a rough stone, the only weapon the place afforded. But the things did not at once approach the far corner where he and the woman cowered. First they went to the dead woman.

Ticknor turned his head away, and covered his ears with his hand.

Then a high-pitched scream from the woman beside him, and a chorus of startled croakings from their captors made him whirl around toward the mouth of the cave.

Waving in the cave mouth, slowly swaying back and forth, was a triangular,

grayish, eyeless head—a serpentine head as big as a nail-keg, from the jaws of which darted a vicious, forked tongue. Behind the head a tree-like body trailed out to the tunnel beyond, to disappear there in darkness. One of the monstrous water snakes that Ticknor was already only too well acquainted with!

Croaking hoarsely, the lizard-things darted for the cave mouth. There, rolled to one side, was a great round boulder which was evidently used as a barrier across the door to exclude precisely such visitors as the present one. This time—perhaps too eager to get at the succulent feast the stream had yielded them—they had neglected to block the portal.

The woman started to scream again. Ticknor clapped his hand over her mouth.

"Make no noise, on your life! This thing is blind, and there is a chance——"

The lizard-things had got to their boulder too late. Ten feet of the serpent was inside. There was no keeping it out, now.

The huge head swept low, brushed against one of the scurrying lizard-things, pinned it against the rock wall. There was an almost human scream as the great jaws opened for the saurian monster.

The head glided on, more yards of body following. Back and forth the lizard things ran, in blind, insensate panic, the humans all forgotten now in the terrible moment of their own peril. . . .

Nine of the lizard-things had come to the feast a few moments before the snake slid into their cave. Two managed to squeeze out the exit alongside the terrific coils of the serpent. The rest went down that yawning throat.

Inquisitively, not yet sated, the serpent nosed blindly around the cavern. Twice the awful, triangular head came within a foot of touching the two humans. Then—the monster glided out, its great scales rasping dryly over the stone of the floor.

Ticknor picked up the woman, and carried her out to the stream as soon after the snake had left as he dared. There he brought her to with the cold water; and they stumbled to the end of the tunnel—and out into sunlight again.

Almost the first thing they saw was the dead bodies of the lizard-men that had captured Brock and me. Ticknor was completely at sea; but the woman read the riddle correctly. She told of the massing of all the forest people for an uprising, and guessed that one of the bands, marching toward Gayta's village where all were to meet, had encountered and killed this score of lizard-men.

They rested then, these two that had helped each other through so terrible an experience, and afterward hurried to Gayta's village. They got lost half a dozen times, the woman being unfamiliar with this part of the country; and so did not reach the village till some hours after Brock and I had left with our fighting bands.

They followed at once, and after a long, unbroken journey came out at the shores of a lake—to see a strange and dreadful thing:

A few yards from the water's edge was something that looked like a four-legged fish, with a spear placed upright between its gaping jaws which it strove to dislodge, and with one great flipper covering a limp man's body while about the torpedo-shaped monster a girl screamed and danced in terror.

"A sarregg," breathed the woman. "Come away quickly."

But Ticknor had seen a blue wood-flower in the lustrous hair of the girl.

"That's Gayta! And the man the thing has caught must be——"

He did not stop to finish the sentence. He began running toward the grotesque fish, with his spear levelled to strike. The woman followed. She too had got a spear

at the village, and fearlessly she joined Ticknor in stabbing and slashing at the tough-hided flanks of the sarregg.

The harassed fish floundered savagely, first at one and then the other of them—meanwhile freeing my body at last from the pressure of that great flipper. Gayta, with hysterical strength, dragged me away; and eventually the monstrous amphibian waddled back to the water to flounder in and disappear.

So it was that I opened my eyes to see a plump little gray-haired man dressed fantastically in ripped blue trousers and tattered shirt, and to see, keeping always remarkably close to his side, a strikingly handsome woman armed in a warlike way with a spear—but having in her eyes a most unwarlike glow when those eyes rested on the professor.

Our greeting can be imagined. But we cut it short, to start after the army. We found Brock just ready to turn back and search for Gayta and me; and after a short rest, rejoined again, we recommenced our march on the mound city.

15

At about three in the afternoon Brock and I, who were travelling far in advance, leaving the body of the army to Ticknor's direction, stopped at the edge of the forest and peered out at the mound city. It was a quarter of a mile away, over cleared ground. We had at last reached our objective.

There it lay, looking like a gigantic trayful of half-eggshells forty feet high and placed roughly in a circle. And now, as we stared from behind the shrubbery of the forest we appreciated more fully than ever the difficulty there would be in storming the city.

The mound buildings were placed wall to wall, so that the outer walls of the buildings on the edge were fused into a solid barrier, like a surrounding hedge of stone.

This stone barrier was pierced in only eight places in its whole circumference, the breaks being the narrow, stone-flagged streets that meandered through the town. Thus the lizard-men had only to guard those eight street entrances and they could stay protected behind the rock-slab fortifications of their outer building walls for ever. Furthermore, even if we could finally break down their guard and swarm into the streets, we would be faced with the still harder task of storming the thick-walled mound buildings one by one.

Brock sighed and shook his head. "We'll never take that city," he said prophetically.

I was of the same opinion.

"But we've got to try."

"Yes, we've got to try. Perhaps never again will the enslaved humans band together with this same high courage to overthrow their masters. I have a feeling that this will be their last effort."

Awhile longer we stared out at the ominous city, seeming to sleep deserted in the late sun. Then we went back to the band of forest folk.

"We will attack the two street openings on this side of the city," Brock ordered tersely. "One army to each street. March in close formation, with the first two ranks presenting levelled spears and the rear ranks ready to fill any . . . gaps . . . that may occur."

He gazed around at the white, determined faces. No need for exhortations; the spirit of fight was obviously shared by all.

"Forward—march," snapped Brock.

And thirty-four hundred men followed Ticknor and Brock and me, rank on rank, through the outer fringe of the forest and across the cleared area toward the mound city.

Several hundred yards from the outer

ring of buildings, we split into two bands, each marching toward one of the two street openings facing our side of the town. And as we executed the move, we saw for the first time the deadly lizard-men file out of the interior of their city and take up positions of defense. And as we saw them a sort of moan came from all the humans.

Intelligent? These things, neither lizard nor man, were certainly that. For in the interval of our arming and banding together they had contrived defensive armament against our spears, and offensive weapons to make the spears even more futile.

Six-foot, massive wooden shields the lizard-men were bearing before their hides, which nature had already made tough enough to act in a measure as armor. And in addition each lizard-man was swinging a ponderous war-club, a five-foot sledge of wood ending in a ball twice the size of a man's head, studded thickly with flint-like blades of rock.

Across each of the two street entrances, a living gate, formed bands of the ten-foot monsters with their shields and clubs. And there, phlegmatic and unblinking, they waited the attack of the contemptibly puny creatures they had ruled for so many centuries.

But though the moan of uncertainty had risen from the advancing men, there was no check to their attack. At a quick walk, increasing to an orderly run as they neared the street entrances, they charged.

Lizard-men held their shields closer together. Men gripped their levelled spears more tightly. And then the two bodies came together.

THE shock of the contact rang deafeningly through the clear thin air. And the crash of wood on wood was swelled in confusion by the shouts of men and the saurian croakings of the defenders.

I heard Brock's war-like bellowing a hundred yards down the city wall as he led the attack on his street. Then I was too busy with my own section to heed anything else.

A wave battering against a breakwater. That was the way my band hurled itself against the stolid line of lizard-men before us.

The monsters squatted behind their shields. We charged with levelled lances against the oblong wood slabs. Here and there a lizard-man was toppled over backward. Here and there a searching spear-point found a scaled throat. But the second line of lizard-men filled in the holes in the first.

Then, with our spears either broken or out of attacking line for the moment, we were attacked in our turn.

The terrible war-clubs began to whirl about us. The lizard-men, nearly twice as tall as we were, stalked among us like walking towers, beating down at our close-packed ranks with those enormous, stone-studded clubs.

Man after man went down, with his head crushed beyond recognition. And man after man, in the rear ranks of our band, struggled forward over writhing bodies to get at the lizard-men.

I saw my first lieutenant wrench a lizard-man's shield aside just far enough and for long enough to thrust his spear into a swollen paunch. The wounded monster's lidless eyes flamed green. He dashed the man to the ground, raised his great club. I plunged in, sending my own spear into the thick throat of the thing.

I struggled to dislodge the spear from the thrashing monster, couldn't, stopped to pick up another.

The man I had rescued shouted and I whirled to see two other lizard-men leaping toward me.

Their clubs flashed up, far over my head, and whistled down toward me. But

as they fell I squirmed aside like a frightened eel; and the rocky war-clubs hit only the stone flagging of the street with a force that struck sparks.

The lizard-men stumped after me; but now my men had swarmed to them, and they were forced to turn to save their own lives.

The narrow lane had been transformed into a shambles. To get at the lizard-men the forest folk had to climb over a barrier of their own dead, slipping and floundering among them as they strove, with spears that seemed frail as straws, to get past the heavy shields and pierce the foe before they got their own heads beaten in.

Reluctantly the humans began to give back before that unbroken front of shields and whirling, terrific war-clubs. And as they retreated, the lizard-men followed in a solid phalanx, crushing and killing all before them.

The retreat became a rout, with the humans running to get away from the invincible horror behind them.

Half-way to the forest the lizard-men pursued us. Then, still in compact formation, they turned and stumped back to their defending position by the street entrance. They were too cunning to separate even for a moment: one by one they could be overcome, but while they kept together they were unbeatable.

And now we saw the other half of the band, under Brock, come streaming back from the gate they had attacked, battered as sorely as we had been. And in every face was reflected the bitterness of coming defeat.

Brock came over. He was naked from the waist up, his muscular torso streaming blood—both his own and that of man and lizard-man that had gone down beside him. Ticknor joined us, and the three of us talked it over.

"How many went down in your band?" asked Brock.

"I haven't called a roll," I answered. "But I must have lost at least a hundred killed and wounded."

"Our losses were about the same. More if anything. And I don't think more than half a dozen of the damned two-legged lizards went down. We'll never get anywhere like this."

"The trouble," said Ticknor, still panting heavily, "is that the streets are too narrow for our numbers to have any effect. That's all we've got—the odds of numbers. We must find some way to use those odds."

"What can we do?"

Ticknor reflected. Then: "Suppose we charge the streets again—but with only half our number and with the idea of keeping the lizard-men occupied more than of really beating them back. Then the other half of our bands could scale the walls at other points and close in on the defenders from the rear."

Brock nodded quickly. "Good! We'll try it."

In the blood-red sunset we told our respective subordinates of the new plan. And then half of each of the two armies went back to the hopeless task of charging the narrow bottle-necks of streets so effectively corked by the ferocious lizard-men. The other half of our number approached the walls.

UNBROKEN and grim the walls loomed above us, the abutting domes of the roofs forming a scalloped line against the sky. The bottoms of the V-shaped troughs formed by the intersecting domes were fifteen feet above our heads. The problem of scaling that fifteen feet and clambering over the roofs to drop into the streets behind the defending lizard-men was no simple one.

We solved it by climbing over the

pyramided bodies of our own ranks, as acrobatic tumblers form living pyramids in a circus, with the top man continually clambering upon the roof and being replaced by another. I went up first, and kept a lookout to be sure none of the crocodilian monsters saw our new angle of attack.

There was no outcry of any kind. It seemed our move might be successful. And when fully a hundred men had made the shaky ascent, I gave the signal and we all dropped into the near street.

At once we started to run toward the gate, to catch the guards there from the rear and annihilate them between two opposing forces of humans.

And at once, from every building entrance before us, came dozens of the towering lizard-men—to surround us as hunters surround corraled wild animals, and to club us down at their leisure. Our move had not only been anticipated, it had been permitted—with a generalship diabolic in its cleverness.

Some few of us escaped, by leaping for the spears lowered to us by our fellows still on the roofs, and being hauled up by them. But nine out of ten of the forest men who had climbed the outer rampart stayed in the grisly street, so battered that they were almost beyond recognition as human beings.

Then the lizard-men began climbing the walls to get at us; and so unnerved were the humans that they did not try to beat them down again, but simply jumped over the outer edge and raced for the shelter of the woods.

And there, once more limping back from the street entrances, came the remnants of the second attacking bands.

"Listen to them," said Brock, waving his hand around at the scattered knots of men. "We're through. They'll not face another attack."

And, indeed, it was plain enough that he was right. Conviction of defeat stared from every face, rang hollowly in every voice. The humans were beaten by their lizard antagonists; and the humans knew it. And there in the purple twilight, we heard talk on every side of disbanding and slinking back to the far corners of the island in the ice, to kneel down again to the oppression of the saurian monsters—and to hope that the punishment meted out to them would not be that of utter extinction.

An army of men, armed and fired by war-like eagerness for the first time in centuries, had marched with almost hysterically gay confidence to battle. Now, in less than two hours, it was plain to the most stupid that the venture had been hopeless from the outset.

"God, it was terrible—the utter invincibleness of the things," said Ticknor dully. And Brock and I nodded wearily.

"We can't quit fighting," said Brock at last. "Death would be preferable to life under these beasts, now that rebellion has been tried and has failed. It looks like death either way. I can't see that we have a chance."

"I think we have," said Ticknor slowly. "It's a long chance, a twenty-to-one shot, and if it fails we're through for good. But it's certainly worth trying."

16

BEWILDEREDLY, we stared at him. "A chance? Twenty-to-one shot? What are you talking about?"

"Our chance lies in the space-shell."

"The space-shell!" repeated Brock. "That's wrecked utterly. And we have no guns——"

"We have the false bottom of the shell," explained Ticknor. "The super-searchlight we depended on to shoot us back to Earth from Alpha Centauri. In

that searchlight arrangement, which is still unharmed and ready at a touch to propel the space-ship like a shot out of a cannon, there is immense power—if we can find a way to use it."

"Do you mean to drag it here, and discharge the remnants of the shell at the city walls like a cannon ball?"

Ticknor shook his head.

"No, that would give us but a single shot. Only a few of the lizard-men would be killed, and the breach made in the walls would be no larger than the street gates which we have already failed to storm. The light itself is the only thing that can really help us."

"I see," whispered Brock, his eyes flaming.

And, remembering back to my first meeting with the sober little scientist, I saw too. What had he said when I asked him the secret of producing the enormously powerful light that was to propel his space-ship through the skies?

"That . . . I do not wish to make public. The super-searchlight, as I have developed it, would be too ghastly an engine of war, if someone got hold of its secret and abused it. By training it on a body of men one could rip them to pieces, smash them to bits!"

Those had been his words. And I saw now exactly what he had meant by his present speech.

"Why, it's as good as done!" I exclaimed.

But both Brock and Ticknor smiled mirthlessly at my optimism.

"If we don't get the majority of the lizard-men in one sweep, we're finished," Brock pointed out. "We have no way of getting more radium to recharge our gun."

"If we don't get *all* the lizard-men we're finished," Ticknor corrected quietly. "For in spite of every precaution we can take, the lot of us will be temporarily blinded by the terrific burst of light that will ensue for some five seconds after I switch on the searchlight. And while we're blundering around like blind slugs, a handful of the lizard-men could kill our whole army!"

But that possibility—or, rather, probability—swung no weight. There was nothing left to do but try Ticknor's scheme. So we discussed ways and means.

"It will take days to drag the searchlight here," said Ticknor. "In many places the trails are too narrow to accommodate it. Trees will have to be felled, or new trails made."

But here Brock came in with his more practical turn of mind. "We won't try to get it here—we'll take the lizard-men there!" he said.

"If they'll allow themselves to be decoyed out of their city," I said pessimistically.

"I think that can be worked. If they can be convinced that our strength is broken, and that by following our retreat they can finally overtake us and smash the backbone of the revolt in one blow, they'll follow all right!"

And now it was time to turn our attention to the men. Already some few dozens had slunk away into the woods, ready to give up and take whatever fate their newly enthroned masters wished to deal them. The rest were obviously on the point of deserting too. And surely none could blame them. . . .

We called together the "squad leaders" we had picked to keep discipline under us. And then came the difficult task of trying to explain to them what we meant to do.

Their spirit was utterly gone; but eventually we managed to infuse some of our own faint hope into them; and by some wizardry of oratory they got the men back in hand.

We settled down to a dreary night,

with guards posted to make sure there was no counter-attack in the darkness, and with half a hundred fires twinkling in the blackness of the forest where the women that had accompanied us prepared a meal for their beaten men.

With the first light of dawn Ticknor, and a hundred men, commenced the long march back to Gayta's village, and the space-shell. They were to prepare the shell for the lizard-men's reception—while we centered all our efforts on decoying the monsters from their impregnable city.

Brock called for a volunteer for dangerous duty. A young forest man approached.

"We are about to attack the city once more," he said. The youngster turned pale. Brock went on. "But this attack is not a real one. We are going to charge one of the streets, fight but a little while, and then fall back to the forest. You are to drop among the dead and wounded, and allow yourself to be captured. You know the lizard-men's language?"

"Yes."

"Very well. You will let them find out from you that we are beaten at last, and are retreating to Gayta's village, there to wait in a last stand against the lizard-men. We want them to follow us through the forests to the village—and we want *all* of them to follow. You understand?"

"Yes."

Brock laid his hand on the man's shoulder for an instant. The lizard-men might dispatch him without waiting for him to give his message—or they might kill him once they had got a "betrayal" from him. In any event the job he had volunteered for led almost certainly to death; and no one knew it better than he did himself.

He went back to the ranks, his face a mask, and we started again from the fringe of the forest toward the two city gates that had already seen such carnage.

In the lightening gold of dawn we saw that the entrances had been cleared of the heaps of bodies, and that—drawn up as invincibly as before—the ranks of lizard-men awaited us with shield and war-club.

Again, nerving ourselves desperately for the fight, we charged that grim line. Again there was the deafening shock of the wave of humans battering against the breakwater of the lizard-men's shields.

For minutes the fierce fighting continued. And then our lines broke as before, and we gave way, a step backward at a time, toward the forest. As before, the defenders followed us a part of the distance across the clearing, then stopped.

We went on, to halt when the fringe of the woods hid us. Brock and I turned back—to watch.

Would the misinformation we had hatched reach the proper ears? Would our volunteer have the chance to tell of our route, and our plan to make a last stand in the village?

Tensely we peered out of the underbrush to find an answer to that question in the monsters' actions.

They had started to turn back to their city as before; and our faces fell. Then one of their number approached the gigantic leader dragging a man—the volunteer we had coached.

There were excited croakings, and we saw the leader listen absorbedly to the words of the captive. Finally, the leader dispatched two lizard-men back to the mound city.

And then we could have shouted for joy!

From the city began to march rank after rank of the brutes, headed by their king himself. Dozens of the lizard-men, finally scores of them! They had got the false message and had swallowed the bait whole.

We hurried forward to where the main band of forest folk waited our coming. And then we started our retreat, the march that should end by the little lake where the space-shell—and the enormously powerful super-searchlight in which it was cupped—might perhaps prove our deliverance.

It was a nightmare, that ordered retreat. No need to simulate the despair of men marching to their last stand. That despair was a real and justified one.

Ahead, following back along the trail over which we had marched so determinedly the day before, straggled we humans. Behind, always in sight of us and moving with grim sureness of our coming destruction, stalked the lizard-men.

Gigantic, scale-armored and shield-protected, swinging their terrific war-clubs as lightly as if they had weighed but a few ounces, the lizard-men had reason for the contempt in which they held their comparatively feeble adversaries. We might have been an unarmed mob of civilians, back in 1990, fleeing before the slow, steady advance of two or three hundred armored war-tanks, for all the resistance we could offer.

Nevertheless, we did show resistance now and then. Occasionally in that grim retreat we stopped and fought. But it was sheer theatrics, to keep the main band of the lizard-men intent on our trail. The theatrics cost a tragic number of lives. . . .

All day that slow retreat continued. And all night.

The night was truly horrible. The lizard-men could see in the dark to some extent. We humans could not. And so we stumbled and fell, and got up to run and rejoin the rest of our fellows before the lizard-men could catch us; while they, steadily moving monsters, stalked surefootedly among the trees.

DAWN found us haggard, exhausted, a doomed band staggering red-eyed onward toward the village. But it found the lizard-men as untired, seemingly, as when they started. They were in better shape, really: the marching and fighting had taken down their bellies, which were now only a little distended with their gargantuan five-day feasting. They were beginning to be their quick-moving selves again.

But now at last we were approaching the lake beside which rested what was left of the space-shell. And we pondered, Brock and I, as to how best we could draw the lizard-men on to expose themselves to the devastating ray of that terrific searchlight.

"We've got to sidestep them somehow, so they will march toward it while we stay off to one side," said Brock. "And how we can keep them from promptly following after us if we march to the right, or to the left, is more than I can figure out."

"A lot depends on which way Ticknor has pointed the thing," I said.

We were both so used up by nervous strain and physical fatigue that we could hardly think straight. As for our men—some of them had even gone so far as to throw away their spears, the slight burden of them being more intolerable than the thought of being left defenseless against the lizard-men.

"He'll probably have the shell pointed directly back along the trail we're following," said Brock.

"We might march directly at it, split to right and left when we get to within a few yards, and leave the main army of lizard-men walking in its path."

"I doubt if the beasts would continue to advance straight at it," said Brock. "Even if they weren't clever enough to sense the trap, brute fear of the unknown would keep them from marching straight

into the face of so strange and mysterious a contrivance."

It was my own thought; but I said nothing more. Our course seemed decided for us: all we could do was emerge into the clearing by the lake, see how the searchlight was pointed, and then try to draw the lizard-men across its path in such a way that the destroying beam would reach the lot of them.

THE trees began to thin out. In the distance we caught a glint of sunlight on serene blue water. We all insensibly quickened our steps. . . .

Brock and I gazed behind. A hundred yards or so away were the lizard-men, split into single files as they moved among the trees but keeping close together all the same. Expressionless, machine-like, unhuman, they stumped after us on their powerful legs, intent on stamping all spirit from these their rebelling slaves and grinding to more complete serfdom the few they might spare for selfish reasons. The sunlight filtered through the leaves above to fleck with gold the greenish gray of their crocodilian bodies, and to reflect dully from their cold, unwinking eyes.

We burst out of the fringe of the woods into the clearing by the lake. And there we halted—turned to stone, paralyzed.

Dumfounded, we stared along the shore of the little lake—at the spot where the shell had first let us down into this weird world so many millions of years older than our own—at the place where we had first got out of it to explore the surrounding forests.

It was the spot, all right. There was no doubt of that. That was the place where we had left the shell—the goal of our awful, twenty-four hours' retreat.

But the shell itself was gone.

The shock of that discovery lingers with me still. How fiercely had we hugged to our breasts the dim faint hope given to us by Ticknor's plan! How our tired eyes had been straining for the sight of that shell! How the thought of the tremendous power in the false bottom behind the shell—ready for devastating release when it should spew the shell itself out of its path—had sustained our failing nerve!

And now—to get here at last, with the lizard-men successfully decoyed all this way—and find no shell here!

Nor was there a sign of Ticknor or the hundred he had taken with him.

Silently Brock and I stared at each other. And then our hands went out, to meet in a silent, hard grip of farewell.

"I think the shore of the lake, where the shell . . . used to be . . . is the best place to meet them," was all Brock said.

No need to give orders to the men! The lizard-men had already caught up to us as we stood there rigid in our consternation. All of us rushed forward, to the shore of the lake, and turned there at bay.

The lizard-men, at a croaked order from their king, formed into a long triple line as they came from the woods. In solid, compact array they came after us, shoulder to shoulder, shield touching shield, with their war-clubs poised high to beat down upon us. And in those cold, dull eyes of theirs was death.

The message our volunteer had given the lizard-men had been all too true. We had come back here to make our last stand. To die!

On they came, the towering monsters, in their straight triple line, cutting off all thought of flight. Even the lake at our backs offered no way out. These lizard-things were as much at home in water as on land. On they came, the green fire of cold fury in their eyes.

"Ground your spears," said Brock hoarsely.

The humans, wordless in the face of doom, rested their crude lances butt down on the earth, with the points presented at a forty-five degree angle to the relentlessly moving enemy.

"Second and third ranks, close in."

Those of us behind the first line of levelled spears moved forward till our bodies touched their, and grounded our spears so that the points bristled almost on a line with their own. And there we waited, our triple line of spears slanted to receive the triple line of the enemy.

"Get set!" snapped Brock; and I saw his eyes go up, once, to the calm beauty of the sky, as though to say farewell to it.

I too glanced around for a fleeting second. Ah, it was beautiful, this little world in the larger world of slowly receding ice. The air had a thin purity which made it like an elixir. The trees and shrubs were almost tropic in their lush growth. And the heat of the sun, tempered with the damp coolness of the ice fields several hundred miles away, gave the oasis a kind of everlasting spring.

But now the straight, long, triple line of crocodilian heads had blotted out the land before me. They—death—stalked less than fifty yards away. . . .

"Into the lake—and close your eyes!"

From the woods to our right came the vibrant hail.

Ticknor's voice! Freighted with deadly urgency!

"Quick! *Dive!*"

17

TICKNOR'S first thought when he completed the march back to the space-shell was for the batteries. There would be still enough of a charge in them, he felt sure, to break down the little lump of radium in the bowl of the searchlight into which the shell was cupped—if they had not been smashed with the rest of the things in the interior of the cabin.

With his heart thudding in his throat, then, he had stepped into the shell—for the first time since we three had left it, days ago, to fall into the clutches of the lizard-men.

He felt sick and faint as he viewed for the first time at close range the damage the saurian beasts had done.

The interior of the space-ship was a total wreck. Each of the carefully fitted metal drawers in the walls had been smashed to bits, together with all their contents. The rocket motor was half twisted from its bed-plates, and so caved in that a whole machine-shop could not have set it running again. The crate in which was packed the miniature time-machine and the special camera it contained——

His knees felt weak as he gazed at it. The lizard-men had not stopped to rip the case open; one of them had simply raised it up and dashed it, with its fragile contents, onto the metal floor. Probably it was smashed to fragments.

However, he had no time for close examination of what, for the moment at least, were irrelevant details. The batteries! They were the main concern.

He went to the rear of the cabin. There, in a special vault-like compartment let into the rear wall, were the batteries.

Ticknor pried up the inconspicuous, combination handle and opening-lever, and swung the covering trap-door open. Thank heaven! They, at least, had been spared. Either the lizard-men had not noticed that rear compartment, or our insane attack on them had diverted their attention before they'd had time to investigate it. Anyhow, the batteries were untouched.

He set about preparing his doubtful trap.

Ticknor wanted the shell moved; but he wanted no trace of its removal, such as a crushed trail of grass and earth that might result if it were dragged, to show.

He ordered long, slender trees to be felled. The forest folk, obeying him implicitly although they could not have helped but wonder about the purpose of it all, cut the trees, trimmed them of branches, and rolled half a dozen of them under the shell.

Then by sheer strength of numbers, they lifted the little space-ship bodily and carried it to a spot carefully selected by Ticknor.

This spot was in the edge of the forest off to one side of the trail leading from the lake to the dome city, so that it would remain hidden from any who marched back along that trail—and it was at the base of a low hill.

Ticknor had remembered a fact that, obvious as it was, had escaped Brock and me. That was that the super-searchlight, like any other great gun, must be backed against something solid to take up its enormous recoil.

Working with all haste, the men dug away at the hillside till a flat, sheer surface resulted. Against this, propped firmly by earth itself, the false bottom of the shell was rammed home, with the nose of the ship pointing in a line paralleling the shore of the little lake.

Ticknor removed the big main switch from the smashed control board, and carried it outside to an alcove made by throwing up earthen breastworks next the ship. Then he wired it to the gap in the cable leading from batteries back through the rear of the shell into the false bottom.

Now he was ready. His monster stream of light, with the throwing of the switch, would rip out through the concealing screen of trees to fell all that stood in its path. If the lizard-men were decoyed here as planned, and if kindly fortune should guide them across the line that would be taken by the released beam——

But only time would answer that question.

As an afterthought, he stripped the cabin of all metal from the rocket motor down, and dumped the resulting pile of scrap beside the crate in which was the time-machine—or whatever was left of it—in a safe spot behind the hill. Also he took out the glass windows. There might possibly be a use for these things some day. . . .

Then there was nothing to do but wait—to see whether chance would favor us or whether we were all irrevocably lost.

DAWN deepened into early morning; and Ticknor's outpost came running toward him.

"They come—our brothers, and all the lizard-men!"

"On the trail we followed to their city?"

"Yes."

Ticknor gnawed at his knuckles. The game—on which everything was placed on the board—was about to open. All or nothing! A hope of life against sure death if the tenuous scheme fell through!

The crackling of twigs from afar heralded the near approach of hunted and hunters. Peering from the concealment of trees and shrubs, Ticknor saw us, wild-eyed, exhausted rabble that we were, come stumbling from the trees—to stop in a frenzy of despair as we saw no shell where we had counted on its being.

A reassuring shout to us stuck in his throat. The lizard-men would be warned as well by any betraying noise.

In an agony of suspense he watched us. Would we break and scatter, with

the lizard-men scattering after us and all hope lost? Would we stay where we were, far out of the line of his searchlight, and fight it out?

Then commenced our rush to the lake shore, and the relentless, ordered advance of the lizard-men in their straight triple line.

Ticknor crouched behind his earthen barrier, and bit his lip till the blood came. Across the open area, tramping grimly after our disordered retreat, went the straight line of the lizard-men. Would they keep that line? Would they hold that direction?

If they wheeled so that their lines slanted across his line of fire, or if they scattered formation——

But they didn't. Ticknor's breath hissed between his clenched teeth as he saw them stalk like a many-headed machine—straight on before him!

Nearer, a little nearer, just a few more feet. . . .

He saw us ground our spears in our last stand by the blue lake, saw the lizard-things swing their clubs high over their hideous heads. And then——

"Into the lake—and close your eyes!"

All the force of his lungs went into that glad shout, as the lizard-men unconsciously stalked into the line of death before the snout of the space-shell.

"Quick. *Dive!*"

And he threw the switch.

Like a crowd of puppets, jerking to the taut string of that ringing cry, we dived. We tumbled over one another to get to the sanctuary of the lapping water a few feet behind us.

And even as we splashed into it, the world seemed to blast to pieces all around us.

There was a shrieking roar as though all the winds of heaven had turned loose in this spot. The ground trembled so that great waves formed in the little lake—waves which now buried us many feet deep, now left us cowering naked and exposed on the dry lake bed.

The hurricane roar persisted; and with it was an enormous, a titanic blaze of light filling all the universe around us. Through water and clenched eyelids, through hands cupped over faces, it beat; to strike agonizingly on eyeballs it was impossible fully to protect from it.

Men shrieked in agony, their shouts forming a little whisper against the mad bellowing of the world about us. All of us writhed face down in the mud of the lake bottom, trying to hide from that awful, blasting light.

And then the light ceased. The titanic shrieking of elements in pain died out. In the distance trees could be heard crashing to the ground, the last one falling fully a minute after the cataclysm had stopped.

The waters of the lake sullenly smoothed out; and abysmal silence beat at our ears.

Slowly, by twos and threes, the men crawled from the water to dry land. Like wounded, enfeebled slugs we must have been—slugs that felt this way and that as they wormed their way back to safety—slugs that now and then missed the direction and wound back into the lake again.

For every one of us in that slow-crawling, racked mob was blind.

Blind! Helpless! Defenseless! With scores of the lizard-men—for all we knew—still left alive to lay about them with their deadly clubs!

But no clubs crashed among us. And gradually the paralyzing fear of being slaughtered like sheep while we scrabbled weakly on the ground, left us. The gods of war must have been with us. Either

the lizard-men had been destroyed, or they had been blinded as we had been.

There is no telling how long that blindness lasted. Probably not more than ten minutes. But it seemed ages that we felt about in a pitch-black universe, before our tortured eyes began to function dimly again.

And then, as images and colors began again to be perceived, what a sight we saw!

Off to our left, extending off and away beyond the range of eyesight, was a great, straight road through the thick forest. Like a broad highway, laid out in a ruler line, it went toward the horizon; and in that roadbed nothing grew. Smooth and bare the oozing black earth showed in it, stripped of all vegetation from humble marsh grass up to mighty trees. Here and there a tree had toppled across it from the sides; but save for those the way was clean as a hound's tooth.

How far did that weird highway extend? Well, later we went down it; and we found that it shot clear across the island—and half a mile straight into the solid ice of the glacial wall. And there at its end we also found a fused, jagged ball of metal, like a meteorite, that was all that was left of the space-shell.

The lizard-men? Not one was left. Squarely, full blast, Ticknor had caught them when he shot home his switch, enfilading them with deadly precision.

It is probable that the stripped hull of the space-shell, shot into their midst with the speed of light, annihilated them all. If a few had happened to survive, the ensuing beam of light smashed them to atoms an instant later. At any rate, no least trace of one was ever found in that vicinity.

The sun of the lizard-men had set. The few their ruler had left to guard their city were hunted out and killed a few days later. In a week not one was left to poison the little Eden in the ice.

18

THERE is no more to tell about save our plans for the future. And those plans are uncertain. We haven't yet chosen our course.

Yes, chosen! We are, we think, in a position to choose.

Out of the materials stripped from the cabin of the space-shell, Ticknor has repaired the small time-machine we brought with us, and has built a big machine along the same lines. He is positive that the larger machine will bear the three of us back to our born place among the ages and among you who, I hope, will read these words.

In a little while we shall experiment with the small machine. We shall try to send it back to 1990. We can not set it to run backward for a certain definite period, because we do not know exactly how far in the future we are living. But the professor thinks he can set the controls so the machine will run indefinitely till it reaches the proper era, when it will stop automatically.

I shall take advantage of the experiment to send to our world this story, wrapped and sealed against the unguessable exposures of its long flight through time.

But though we are certain we can go back to our world whenever we please—we don't know yet whether we *do* please.

It is lovely, this five-hundred-mile circle in the ice. We are absolute rulers over it and all the gentle, fine folk who dwell in it. Besides, Brock has all the adventure his heart craves—hunting the great serpents in the caves near the black pool, and exterminating the last of the deadly sarreggs (this thick bundle of bark paper shall be wrapped in the hide of one of the curious walking fish). And Profes-

sor Ticknor has as wife the brave and beautiful woman who saved his life in the caverns.

And I have Gayta. . . .

I think perhaps we'll stay.

* * * * *

Note: This manuscript, sewed in a bit of tough hide rather like sharkskin, was found in a tangle of glass and metal coils in the Sahara sands south and west of Touggourt. Lieutenant Chavannes, of the Foreign Legion, who found the hide-wrapped bundle, did not of course know the significance of that tangle of machinery—which was so accurate that it missed its time-destiny by only half a century. He rode away and left it; and to date it has not been re-found in the boundless area of the desert.

[THE END]

Drums of the Congo

By KATHERINE VAN DER VEER

A freighter'll soon be sailing to the shores of Zanzibar,
To isles of pungent spices where pearls and sapphires are.
Beyond the seas are coco-palms and frangipani flowers,
Red temples swing their golden bells to measure out the hours—
But breaking through these reveries an ancient rhythm comes,
I can hear the urgent throbbing of the Congo drums.

BOM-M-M, bom-m-m, while the jungle holds its breath,
BOM-M-M, bom-m-m, they call to war or death,
Beating, beating, on the hollowed wood,
Ghost-drums summon a ritual of blood.

The fishing-schooner Abigail goes out of port today,
To plow her long green furrow in a lonely arctic bay,
Where seals can bask on icebergs, and wind blows through the spars
On men in shining oil-skins beneath the frosty stars.
But louder than the gull's cry, overhead and under,
Piercing through the shaking sky with a voice of thunder:

BOM-M-M, bom-m-m, calling war or death,
BOM-M-M, bom-m-m, till the jungle holds its breath,
From the sounding-board of Africa insistent rhythm comes,
The unforgotten throbbing of the Congo drums.

What Waits in Darkness

By LORETTA BURROUGH

A grim story of a woman's happiness that was menaced by a dreadful, recurrent dream

WITH a thick, choking sob, Christy Tenniel woke in the silvery coolness of early morning. The pigeons that the Jones boys kept on the roof were airing their flute throats in the dawn as Roger lumbered out of sleep beside her, making startled sounds.

"What is it, Chris? What's the matter?" He circled her shaking body roughly with his soft, fat arm. "That damn dream?"

Its trembling bloody mists began to float away from her; their commonplace room came clear, with the picture of Roger's mother smiling dimly from the opposite wall.

"Again. I can't stand it much longer." Night after night, in the thickets of darkness, it waited for her. For months now she had fought sleep until she was haggard and thin.

He reached for a package of cigarettes on the bedside table. She could imagine the angry bewilderment in his eyes; he did not like his wife to be in any way abnormal. And she saw it as the match flared, lighting puckers of annoyance about his mouth.

"That nerve specialist didn't help much," he said. " 'Some hidden fear, or hatred.' Expensive bunk, that's all. You've got no fears or hatreds." He snorted, and sucked on the cigarette so hard that bright red sparks flew.

Roger's talk was all very well, but Doctor Wilks had said softly, watching her from opaque brown eyes—"Do you love your husband, Mrs. Tenniel?"

She had answered, "Of course."

Then Wilks had frowned, glowering at his clean fingernails. "You must tell me the truth, not lie. Otherwise I can not help you."

She had stared dumbly at his desk, shining with wax, and then suddenly the words had pushed their burning way out of her. "No, I do not love him. I loved another man, my husband's best friend. He was killed in an accident, a week before he was to marry me."

Duncan, light-hearted, quick, warm, like the old song—"Duncan, Duncan, tender and true." She could have spared the lumbering dull Roger so much more easily. And then, two years after Duncan had died, she had married Roger, since he was always around, since she could talk of Duncan with him. A wrong sort of marriage, all wrong.

Doctor Wilks had thought so too. "Better for you to separate," he had suggested.

"But how could not loving Roger make me have this dream?" She had looked at Doctor Wilks' face with numb bewilderment in her own. "Why should I always dream" — she had repeated it again—"that I am standing in a drafty hall. There is a night-light burning in a little crystal bowl, and rain pouring down a black window-pane. I am in a night-dress—there is blood on my bare feet, down the side of my gown, and dripping from the end of a knife I hold in my right hand." She had stumbled

then, and hidden her eyes with her gloved fingers.

And if she separated from Roger, who would wake and hold her when she started up trembling and crying? Doctor Wilks believed she would no longer have the dream, if they were apart. But how did he know?

"Here, I've got an idea!" Roger had been smoking cigarettes furiously beside her, while she sat and shivered. "My vacation's coming next week. What say we go up to my aunt's place in Maine, where we had our honeymoon? She's not using it this year. She's bought new things, fixed it up nicely, and that sun and air'll cure you in a hurry."

"No, not there!" Every nerve in her body had shuddered at the suggestion. It had been such a dreadful honeymoon, with Roger never suspecting that it was a dead man she desired at her side.

"Why not?" Placidly, he squashed the cigarette. "It's quiet, but it'll be good just for that reason. Better than a noisy hotel. I'll phone Auntie tomorrow. We *will* go there."

Impossible to turn as an avalanche when he had fastened to an idea—she knew that they would go.

"COZY, huh?" Roger thumped down the bags and shook his big shoulders. He went about thumbing the light switches, and the little oblong room suddenly blinked back at them, as though surprized. The wife of a near-by farmer had cleaned it and left a fire laid; Roger stooped above the long logs and touched a match to kindling.

"My aunt's changed it a lot, hasn't she? Nifty. What say?" He looked at her.

"Very nice, Roger," she answered mechanically, spreading her palms to the warmth that began to trickle from the fire. Even on the train she had dreamed, and wakened suffocating, in the coffin-like berth. "Shall we get the bags upstairs?"

He pounded up before her, making the small house shake. "Same room we had —I told the woman in my letter. Looking out on the bay."

Wearily, she made the twin beds and set the new cottage furniture to rights. Down in the kitchen, with unusual good humor and a great clatter, Roger was getting supper ready. She unpacked the bags and hung their clothes in a closet that smelled of salt air and mice, then went to the window and looked out. Night was curving like a gentle hood over everything; stars shone, tiny candles in a great dark room. But nothing had seemed beautiful to her since Duncan died; it was a curiously empty world.

"Come and get it!" Roger called, and she walked out into the quiet, still hall. She stopped instantly, while her heart thudded in bad, false beats, and the air turned to lead within her lungs.

It was a narrow passage, paneled in ugly dark wood, with a big dormer-window at the end of it. Because of the dormer it had a queer effect of closing in; it was like a tunnel ending in the black panes sprinkled with starlight. On a small table to the side was a night-light in a crystal bowl, and beneath her feet a rough, thick carpet splotched with roses like pink blisters. She had seen it all many times. She stared a moment longer, and she felt as though the darkness outside the window were entering her brain. Then she ran down the stairs.

He was setting a little table in the living-room, with food they had bought in the village as they passed through.

"Roger!" she cried. "Roger!"

He stared at her, startled. "What's

the matter now?" he asked, with a peevish undertone to the words.

"Roger"—she slipped into a chair at the table; life was beginning to flow in her again—"we must leave here. Right away. That hall upstairs, the hall——"

He put a hand on her shoulder, shaking her a little. "Talk sense, Christy," he said irritably. "Why must we leave here? And what about the hall?"

With a spasmodic effort, she controlled herself. "Roger, that hall is the one I see in my dream. Always. I did not notice it when we carried up the bags, but I saw, just now. The one I see in my dream," she repeated. "The same dark panels, the same dormer-window, the same carpet on the floor."

"Is *that* all?" He sat down opposite her, picked a bit of pink ham from the plate and chewed the edge of it reflectively. "You'll go nuts if you don't watch out. It's nothing but a dream, and to let yourself get in such a stew about it——"

"But you see that of course we must leave here?" Leave the place where the dream's setting had become real. Leave it before—before what? In silence, she pleaded with the stubborn blue eyes across the table.

"Of course nothing." He wiped his greasy fingers on the edge of a napkin. "Pull up your chair and have a go at this. The ham's good."

"Roger!"

He laid a slice of meat on her plate, and heaped salad beside it, his thick mouth drawing close in determined lines. "If you think I've paid those walloping train fares for nothing, just to give in to a silly woman's whim! . . . We're here, and here to stay until my vacation's over."

He ate a forkful of potato with a look of deep relish.

"Roger——"

She stared at him; she felt cold and frightened.

QUEERLY enough, although she expected it that night, although she went to bed with her mind darkly open to receive it, the dream did not come. And clear night after clear night dropped with its stars into day and never did she wake trembling, the sweat of fear freezing on her.

"You see," said Roger complacently, the evening before they were to leave; almost two weeks had slipped by, smooth, happy enough—"What did I tell you?" He was standing by the small table in the dining-room, sharpening a knife with quick, hard strokes of his hand, downward and upward. "All you needed was to get away from the city. Fresh air, exercise, sun, they cure anything. Look at this knife—isn't it a beaut? Going to take it home with me—Auntie'll never miss it."

"Where did you find it—let's see," she said absently, thinking: "Perhaps he's right. I was overwrought—I needed rest."

"In the attic." He turned toward her; the smooth gleaming blade came into view and the handsome carved handle. "It was all rusted, but it's a peach now. Good steel."

Her eyes straining at it, aching beneath the delicate skin of her lids; her breath rushed from her lungs in a gasp. Beneath her, knees went to boneless putty.

"Roger," she moaned, "I've seen that before."

She leaned against the wall for support, her stare still held to the long, curving line of metal; all the light in the room seemed to stream toward her from the shining steel.

He dropped the blade, snatched a glass of water from the table and held it to her

mouth. "What's the matter?" His heavy features sharpened with bewilderment.

She sipped the water, cold and flat, then pushed the glass away. "Oh, take me seriously," she begged, clasping one hand on his arm. "*That* knife—it is the one I see in my dream. Just like that, except——" Except that blood ran down the thin sharp steel, dripping from the tip to the floor, spreading in a small still pool on the patterned rose carpet.

She was aware as she watched him, terror freezing in her fingers, in her breast, that rain was beginning outside in the darkness; the first drops touched the panes like soft wet feathers.

"We must get away, now," she said, "tonight," and saw his eyes grow bright with anger. He took up the small whetstone and the knife; the blade made a weak, shrill sound, faster and faster as the speed of his strokes increased.

"We will not." His hard face concentrated on the whetting. "You little fool, to give a second thought to a dream!"

She was a wave beating against rock, and knew it. "Duncan would have listened to me. Duncan would have been patient, kind, not like you. . . ." She slipped into a chair and dropped her face into her cold hands. Where was Duncan? Gone beyond reach and touch, lost in a lightless world.

She heard her husband's footsteps coming dimly toward her; her eyes as she lifted her head rested again on the knife that he still held in his blunt fingers.

"I'm going to tell you something," he said sharply. A bleak malice shrilled a little in his words — he was angry. "You're still thinking of him, aren't you? Still loving him. I was only the second best. Duncan would have been the perfect lover, 'patient, kind,' not like me." He sent the knife spinning across the table with a fling of his wrist. "I'll tell you what he said to me, a few days before he was killed."

She waited, her heart drained of everything but a trembling apprehension. He could not touch her memory of Duncan, he could not hurt it, could he?

"He said——" He leaned toward her, face blind with jealousy of a dead man. "He was very intimate with me, you know. He said that he wished to God he could get out of his engagement to you; he said he was tired of you."

She got up clumsily. She had forgotten the dream; she had forgotten everything but his words. But was it the truth? Often had Roger lied to her. But if it were *not* a lie? Always now, between her and Duncan, would be this dull veil of doubt. She stood there, beginning to see herself as a loving fool, discarded by Duncan. Within her skull, a sharp little pain flickered and went and came again.

Into the trembling, nervous silence of the room Roger's conciliating laugh plunged. "Let's forget it all," he said, "dreams—and Duncan. He's dead; it's done with. Now we'll eat, and then we'll go to bed early and get a good night's sleep. A good sleep," he said again.

DOWN the back window of the hall, the rain was pouring with a wild, gushing sound. Into the dark regions of unconsciousness the noise flooded, together with the buffeting screech of wind. Her eyes, although they had been staring dully before her for many minutes, began really to see; she raised her head and looked about her, with a strange heavy feeling of pain and suffering.

First she saw the window; it seemed

to move slightly under the press of rain streaming beyond it. "I have known all this before," she thought, and then her cold stupefied glare fell to the night-light, flickering a little in its small crystal bowl.

Within the house was a thick, petrified stillness that troubled her ears. "Where is Roger?" she wondered, touching her left hand to her head where it lingered upon the shooting ache beneath damp sweaty curls. Always in the night his hoarse, asthmatic breathing had been somewhere near her. "Where am I now?" she puzzled wearily.

Just under the fringe of blankness that veiled her mind was a dreadful meaning; it was like the wind about the house—now it came nearer with a leap, now it whirled away into the distance.

Something touched her bare foot, a soft, cool drop, and another. "The roof is leaking," she thought dully, and looked down at her naked ankle, her long white foot. Not quite white now, for on it were spreading little red circles, dripping from the knife she held clumsily in her hand.

She could feel the skin crawling on her skull, her mouth widened in silence, as her eyes crept to the knife. The blade no longer gleamed; it was slippery, wet—the bright red stain went on, past her wrist; down her night-dress, over her thigh, was a dark clinging splash.

She fell to her knees; she could hear the wind and the rain. Within her head was the breaking down of all thought. She was alone with the silent house. The dream come true.

The Sealed Casket

By RICHARD F. SEARIGHT

The icy fingers of a fetor that was old when the world was young reached for the life of the scheming Wesson Clark—a strange little story

FOR nearly an hour Wesson Clark had been studying the sealed casket, his shrewd black eyes feasting avidly on its crudely carved metal contours. It lay before him in the pool of light from the desk lamp; the light which illumined his classic, calculating features with a pallid glow, while making a shadowy obscurity of the cavernous, book-lined study. Outside, the high March wind shrilled, and plucked with icy fingers at the cornices and gables of the old house. It gave Clark a pleasing, luxurious sense of security to relax in the overheated gloom of the upstairs study and listen to the rising moan without. Careless, slipshod old Simpkins had gone for the night, after stoking the ancient furnace to capacity; and Clark was alone in the house, as he had wished to be for this occasion.

He smiled slightly and hummed a snatch from the latest Gershwin hit, as his gaze returned to his prize. The casket was small and compact, perhaps sixteen inches long by six or seven wide, and formed of a dull, age-tarnished metal that defied casual identification. The crude, writhing images carved into its sur-

face offered no aid to classification; Clark failed to assign them to any known period of early art.

A gratifying legacy to a connoisseur of antiques was this ancient box. Old Martucci had never suspected, then. There had been times when Clark had wondered—and feared—as he carried on his surreptitious affair with Martucci's youthful wife. Not that it mattered now—the sinister old scientist, with his perverted sense of humor, was dead; and Nonna, though filled as ever with Latin fire, seemed much less fascinating, now that legal barriers were removed. Also, she was growing a bit proprietary, a little too assured. Clark knew the signs. He smiled ironically as he studied the casket. While Martucci lived, Clark had cultivated his friendship and enjoyed the conquest of Nonna at stealthy assignations, employing the greatest caution. But now there was nothing to fear. For the moment, at least, he was surfeited with Nonna's charms; and he felt free to discard her as he saw fit, without the haunting dread of discovery and vengeance by the suspicious old archeologist. Besides, he needed freedom to reel in his new catch; one more alluring than the Italian girl had ever been, and endowed with a fortune that ran into almost mythical figures. His intentions were very serious here.

His smile deepened as he recalled the peculiar clause that formed a part of the codicil to the last testament of Martucci—the clause which was the instrument conveying the casket:

"And I do hereby bequeath to my one-time friend, Wesson Clark, the ancient coffer of Alû-Tor; and urge him only to leave the leaden seal thereon intact, as I have done for thirty years."

Clark chuckled softly. Martucci had been a naïve fool in spite of his dubious reputation in scientific circles, where certain ruthless and unethical practises attributed to him were frowned on heavily. He had kept the seal intact, had he? And no guessing what rare treasures of antiquity might be hidden inside! He had spent his life delving in the earth and incidentally acquiring the meager fortune (now almost dissipated) with which he had retired, while, quite possibly, real wealth waited in the casket. But then, the Italian had been a strange character—one of those rare, incomprehensible creatures who appear to place little importance on the mere possession of money. The aggrandizement of his name in scientific discoveries, the search for the forbidden in hidden occult lore, the cynical study of human nature, had seemed to mean much more to him. Certainly he had never opened the casket, for the splotch of melted lead that sealed it was black with age and bore no signs of having been tampered with.

With all the leisurely indolence of his sybaritic nature, Clark lay back and gloated over his acquisition. He scrutinized more closely the cryptic, wavering symbols, vague and spidery, which had been impressed at some remote time on the leaden seal, no doubt while the metal was still hot. They were quite unfamiliar in that they resembled nothing he could recall having seen before; but there was something indefinably disturbing in their almost sentient lines. They brought to mind some utterly impossible *living* thing. He laughed at the absurdity of the impression.

But whatever they represented, the symbols were very old. Their primitive crudeness suggested an antiquity antedating the Phenician alphabet, or even the Mayan inscriptions. Clark regretted his scanty knowledge of such things; for

here, he half suspected, might lie a specimen of the very first primal writing; the groping pictorial attempt to transcribe thought, from which had developed the earliest known written characters. He would preserve the seal intact and have it examined by an authority. Possibly it possessed a definite intrinsic value of its own. Martucci must have known: his knowledge of epigraphy had been profound, and it was whispered that all his developments in that field had not been turned over to science. It was even possible that he had deciphered the inscription, if inscription it were. But in the meantime Clark intended to open the thing.

Certainly he was going to open it. It was quite characteristic of Martucci that, because of some squeamish eccentricity or other, he had refrained from doing so himself. But had he really thought the new owner would use such illogical restraint? Clark chuckled again.

Still, it was odd that the Italian had never spoken of the casket, especially as he must have decided on its disposal some months before. The date of the codicil showed that. No doubt a little surprize for the "one-time friend"—but odd, just the same, for it was an object over which the failing scientist, with his wide knowledge of antiquities, and Clark with his dilettante love for them, might have had many of the discussions the archeologist had so seemed to enjoy.

And that was a strange wording—"one-time." It almost suggested that Martucci had suspected when he dictated the sentence. But that was impossible. The very assignment of such a rare relic was proof in itself of complete trust and good feeling. After all, the import of the words, intended for reading after the writer's death, was plain enough.

Well, there was no need for further delay. He had gloated long enough. His black eyes sparkled greedily as he picked up the heavy brass paper-knife from his desk and dug tentatively at the seal. The leaden smear was surprizingly hard; perhaps it was some strange alloy. He pried harder, finally succeeding in inserting the knife-point between the seal and the age-blackened metal of the box itself. The lead refused to bend further; it clung tenaciously to its age-old moorings. At length Clark left it to rummage about the house for tools. He returned with a hammer, and carefully relocked the study's only door before he sat down.

He used the knife as a wedge, and at the first blow the lead peeled neatly away, disclosing a patch of dully shimmering metal beneath. He had not expected to find that the seal covered a keyhole, and nothing of the sort was visible. Evidently the box was far too ancient for that contrivance.

His heart was pounding. He drew an anticipatory breath, and pried the knife-point under the lid. A little leverage and it was done. The cover came up. The casket was empty.

Clark was genuinely surprized. Strange that the box should be so tightly sealed when it held no contents to be guarded. This lacked plausibility.

As he stared in puzzled bewilderment at the burnished inner surface, he became aware of a faint, fetid odor creeping into his nostrils. He sniffed, his nose wrinkling in distaste. Slight though it was, the smell suggested vaguely the charnel emanation from some long-closed tomb.

Then came the cold draft.

Through the close air of the study, which was gradually becoming oppressively hot, it breathed against his face in a single icy gust, laden with a sudden augmentation of the nauseating odor of putrescence. Then it was gone, and the

heated air had closed about him as if nothing had disturbed it.

Clark started up, then sank back in the chair. He frowned, staring hard at door and windows half hidden in the shadowy gloom beyond the circle of lamplight. He knew them to be locked securely, and an uneasy disquiet stirred in his breast as his probing eyes verified the fact.

His attention was drawn back to the subtle odor of corruption which had gradually grown stronger. It permeated the room now—a dank, mephitic fetor, grotesquely out of place in the quiet study. He rose slowly to his feet, alarm spreading over his features. And as he did so, the icy, noisome chill puffed again upon his face like a breeze from some glacial sepulcher. His head jerked back, and fear dawned in his eyes. Here, in a locked room on the top floor of the old house he had lived in for years, something utterly uncanny, something entirely beyond the realms of sanity, was taking place. Clark started slowly across the study toward the door, then stopped abruptly.

A faint sound had come from the shadows at the far side of the room where the heavy Sarouk rug stopped short a foot from the wall. It was an insidious, barely audible, rustling noise—such a noise as might be made by a great snake writhing along the uncarpeted strip. And it came from *between* him and the door!

CLARK had prided himself, in the past, on his cold-blooded imperturbability; but his breath came quickly now, and the wild, unreasoning fear of a trapped animal flooded his mind. Whatever the nature of the Thing in the room with him—could he doubt its presence? —it was intelligently cutting off his escape. It must be watching his every movement with malignant, brooding eyes. A shudder of stark horror convulsed him at the realization.

He stood very still in the center of the study, his mind racing in frenzied, terror-driven circles. A sense of the crowding presence of some bestial, primordial depravity, of overwhelming defilement, surged with paralyzing certainty through his brain. Thoughts of escape were crowded out—the imminence of the danger routed reasoning power. And yet, through the waves of terror that beat through his consciousness, he realized that his life — yes, his very soul — was menaced by an unspeakable cosmic malevolence.

With a tremendous effort he checked the rising, smothering hysteria and succeeded in regaining a partial control of his thoughts. His eyes pierced the gloom ahead and about him. Nothing stirred. What hideously ancient entity had been imprisoned in the casket? He could not guess, nor did he wish to know. But Martucci had known — Martucci, the authority on ancient writings; the delver in hidden lore! Martucci had known everything. He had schemed—oh, so cunningly! — for revenge, and this was the result. If the dead could know, how the old man must be gloating to see his crafty trap closing about his victim!

Now Clark felt cold vibrations beating upon him; vibrations of inhuman, impersonal evil. His nerves crawled and shrank as from a loathsome physical contact. He shifted uneasily, and there came the sound of a stealthy, slithering movement toward him across the rug. He backed away, until his shoulders bumped against the wall behind him. Still the soft noises continued, slowly drawing near. They detoured to one side, then to the other; then they were back in front of him, and much closer. His eyes searched

the shadows desperately. Empty, formless, mysterious, they were; but nothing moved that his physical sight could detect. The lurking menace, its presence proclaimed by every taut nerve in his body, was still invisible. If he could trust his eyes, he was alone in the room. But he felt the close proximity of something cold and yet alive; something which was a definite physical presence, manifesting itself to him through pre-human senses, semi-atrophied by eons of disuse. Whatever it was, it was aborbing the suffocating heat of the room, actually lowering the temperature, and at a rapid rate.

Quite suddenly, the utter horror of the impossible, incredible situation broke through the dam of desperate resistance his mind had built up. Something snapped, and he laughed—a high-pitched cachinnation of rising hysteria that echoed wildly from lips drawn back in a grinning frenzy of terror. He cringed, flinging up his arms in an abject surrender to fear. A torrent of gibbering incoherency pushed the terrible laughter from his lips. The dusky room swam about him and he did not know that his knees had buckled and that he had plumped forward on them, his arms rigid before his face to ward off the approaching danger.

Again came the icy breath, rank with primeval filth, terrifying in its nearness. It passed lightly over his face, making him retch with its overpowering fetor. Then he shrieked once in paralyzed despair, as slender, groping tentacles, cold as outer space, caressed his throat and body, their deathly chill striking through his clothing as if he had been naked. A vast, flabby, amorphous coldness enveloped him. Repulsively soft and bulky it was, but as he struggled it gripped him with the resistless strength of chilled steel. He could feel the regularly spaced vibrations of some utterly alien, incomprehensible life—a life so frightful that he shrieked again and again as its purpose became apparent.

Then the murky room whirled about him—he had been whisked up, was staring with starting eyes at the ceiling, through which little flames were eating, while the fetid horror gradually compressed its icy folds.

He was falling down, down, through endless shafts of icy blackness into a bottomless quagmire of primordial slime. A vast roaring filled his ears. Monstrous fantasms leered through the bursts of flame that punctuated the rushing descent. Then all was silence and blackness and oblivion.

FANNED by the high wind, the flames had gutted the old house when firemen arrived. Little remained to aid the coroner in his investigation. Naturally, he discounted heavily the fantastic testimony of certain early arrivals regarding a high-pitched, agonized whistling sound which they claimed had proceeded from the upper part of the building, and the belching clouds of foul-smelling smoke which had found an exit after the upper floors collapsed and the whistling stopped. Simpkins' admission that he had neglected to close the drafts of the furnace cleared up the cause of the fire; but, privately, the coroner was exceedingly puzzled by certain peculiarities that the post-mortem disclosed in the charred and blackened corpse, identified by a dentist as Wesson Clark's. It was surely a matter of wonder that virtually every bone in this body had been broken, as if in the embrace of some gigantic snake of the constrictor species; and it was an insoluble mystery how the veins and organs had been *drained of every drop of blood!*

The Judge's House

By BRAM STOKER

WHEN the time for his examination drew near, Malcolm Malcolmson made up his mind to go somewhere to read by himself. He feared the attractions of the seaside, and also he feared completely rural isolation, for of old he knew its charms, and so he determined to find some unpretentious little town where there would be nothing to distract him. He refrained from asking suggestions from any of his friends, for he argued that each would recommend some place of which he had knowledge, and where he already had acquaintances. As Malcolmson wished to avoid friends, he had no wish to encumber himself with the attention of friends' friends, and so he determined to look out for a place for himself. He packed a portmanteau with some clothes and all the books he required, and then took ticket for the first name on the local time-table which he did not know.

When at the end of three hours' journey he alighted at Benchurch, he felt satisfied that he had so far obliterated his tracks as to be sure of having a peaceful opportunity of pursuing his studies. He went straight to the one inn which the sleepy little place contained, and put up for the night. Benchurch was a market town, and once in three weeks was crowded to excess, but for the remainder of the twenty-one days it was as attractive as a desert. Malcolmson looked around, the day after his arrival, to try to find quarters more isolated than even so quiet an inn as "The Good Traveller" afforded. There was only one place which took his fancy, and it certainly satisfied his wildest ideas regarding quiet; in fact, quiet was not the proper word to apply to it—desolation was the only term conveying any suitable idea of its isolation. It was an old, rambling, heavy-built house of the Jacobean style, with heavy gables and windows, unusually small, and set higher than was customary in such houses, and was surrounded with a high brick wall massively built. Indeed, on examination, it looked more like a fortified house than an ordinary dwelling. But all these things pleased Malcolmson. "Here," he thought, "is the very spot I have been looking for, and if I can only get opportunity of using it I shall be happy." His joy was increased when he realized beyond doubt that it was not at present inhabited.

From the post-office he got the name of the agent, who was rarely surprized at the application to rent a part of the old house. Mr. Carnford, the local lawyer and agent, was a genial old gentleman, and frankly confessed his delight at any one being willing to live in the house.

"To tell you the truth," said he, "I should be only too happy, on behalf of the owners, to let any one have the house rent free for a term of years if only to accustom the people here to see it inhabited. It has been so long empty that some kind of absurd prejudice has grown up about it, and this can be best put down by its occupation—if only," he added with a sly glance at Malcolmson, "by a scholar like yourself, who wants its quiet for a time."

Malcolmson thought it needless to ask the agent about the "absurd prejudice"; he knew he would get more information, if he should require it, on that subject from other quarters. He paid his three months' rent, got a receipt, and the name of an old woman who would probably undertake to "do" for him, and came away with the keys in his pocket. He then went to the landlady of the inn, who was a cheerful and most kindly person, and asked her advice as to such stores and provisions as he would be likely to require. She threw up her hands in amazement when he told her where he was going to settle himself.

"Not in the Judge's House!" she said, and grew pale as she spoke. He explained the locality of the house, saying that he did not know its name. When he had finished she answered:

"Aye, sure enough—sure enough the very place! It is the Judge's House sure enough." He asked her to tell him about the place, why it was so called, and what there was against it. She told him that it was so called locally because it had been many years before—how long she could not say, as she was herself from another part of the country, but she thought it must have been a hundred years or more—the abode of a judge who was held in great terror on account of his harsh sentences and his hostility to prisoners at assizes. As to what there was against the house itself she could not tell. She had often asked, but no one could inform her; but there was a general feeling that there was *something*, and for her own part she would not take all the money in Drinkwater's Bank and stay in the house an hour by herself. Then she apologized to Malcolmson for her disturbing talk.

"It is too bad of me, sir, and you—and a young gentleman, too—if you will pardon me saying it, going to live there all alone. If you were my boy—and you'll excuse me for saying it—you wouldn't sleep there a night, not if I had to go there myself and pull the big alarm bell that's on the roof!"

The good creature was so manifestly in earnest, and was so kindly in her intentions, that Malcolmson, although amused, was touched. He told her kindly how much he appreciated her interest in him, and added:

"But, my dear Mrs. Witham, indeed you need not be concerned about me! A man who is reading for the Mathematical Tripos has too much to think of to be disturbed by any of these mysterious 'somethings,' and his work is of too exact and prosaic a kind to allow of his having any corner in his mind for mysteries of any kind. Harmonical Progression, Permutations and Combinations, and Elliptic Functions have sufficient mysteries for me!"

Mrs. Witham kindly undertook to see after his commissions, and he went himself to look for the old woman who had been recommended to him. When he re-

turned to the Judge's House with her, after an interval of a couple of hours, he found Mrs. Witham herself waiting with several men and boys carrying parcels, and an upholsterer's man with a bed in a cart; for she said, though tables and chairs might be all very well, a bed that hadn't been aired for mayhap fifty years was not proper for young bones to lie on. She was evidently curious to see the inside of the house; and though manifestly so afraid of the 'somethings' that at the slightest sound she clutched on to Malcolmson, whom she never left for a moment, went over the whole place.

After his examination of the house, Malcolmson decided to take up his abode in the great dining-room, which was big enough to serve for all his requirements; and Mrs. Witham, with the aid of the charwoman, Mrs. Dempster, proceeded to arrange matters. When the hampers were brought in and unpacked, Malcolmson saw that with much kind forethought she had sent from her own kitchen sufficient provisions to last for a few days. Before going she expressed all sorts of kind wishes; and at the door turned and said:

"And perhaps, sir, as the room is big and drafty it might be well to have one of those big screens put round your bed at night—though, truth to tell, I would die myself if I were to be so shut in with all kinds of—of 'things,' that put their heads round the sides, or over the top, and look on me!" The image which she had called up was too much for her nerves, and she fled incontinently.

Mrs. Dempster sniffed in a superior manner as the landlady disappeared, and remarked that for her own part she wasn't afraid of all the bogies in the kingdom.

"I'll tell you what it is, sir," she said; "bogies is all kinds and sorts of things—except bogies! Rats and mice, and beetles; and creaky doors, and loose slates, and broken panes, and stiff drawer handles, that stay out when you pull them and then fall down in the middle of the night. Look at the wainscot of the room! It is old—hundreds of years old! Do you think there's no rats and beetles there? And do you imagine, sir, that you wont see none of them? Rats is bogies, I tell you, and bogies is rats; and don't you get to think anything else!"

"Mrs. Dempster," said Malcolmson gravely, making her a polite bow, "you know more than a Senior Wrangler! And let me say, that, as a mark of esteem for your indubitable soundness of head and heart, I shall, when I go, give you possession of this house, and let you stay here by yourself for the last two months of my tenancy, for four weeks will serve my purpose."

"Thank you kindly, sir!" she answered, "but I couldn't sleep away from home a night. I am in Greenhow's Charity, and if I slept a night away from my rooms I should lose all I have got to live on. The rules is very strict; and there's too many watching for a vacancy for me to run any risks in the matter. Only for that, sir, I'd gladly come here and attend on you altogether during your stay."

"My good woman," said Malcolmson hastily, "I have come here on purpose to obtain solitude; and believe me that I am grateful to the late Greenhow for having so organized his admirable charity—whatever it is—that I am perforce denied the opportunity of suffering from such a form of temptation! Saint Anthony himself could not be more rigid on the point!"

The old woman laughed harshly. "Ah, you young gentlemen," she said, "you don't fear for naught; and belike you'll get all the solitude you want here." She set to work with her cleaning; and by

nightfall, when Malcolmson returned from his walk—he always had one of his books to study as he walked—he found the room swept and tidied, a fire burning in the old hearth, the lamp lit, and the table spread for supper with Mrs. Witham's excellent fare. "This is comfort, indeed," he said, as he rubbed his hands.

When he had finished his supper, and lifted the tray to the other end of the great oak dining-table, he got out his books again, put fresh wood on the fire, trimmed his lamp, and set himself down to a spell of real hard work. He went on without pause till about eleven o'clock, when he knocked off for a bit to fix his fire and lamp, and to make himself a cup of tea. He had always been a tea-drinker, and during his college life had sat late at work and had taken tea late. The rest was a great luxury to him, and he enjoyed it with a sense of delicious, voluptuous ease. The renewed fire leaped and sparkled, and threw quaint shadows through the great old room; and as he sipped his hot tea he revelled in the sense of isolation from his kind. Then it was that he began to notice for the first time what a noise the rats were making.

"Surely," he thought, "they can not have been at it all the time I was reading. Had they been, I must have noticed it!" Presently, when the noise increased, he satisfied himself that it was really new. It was evident that at first the rats had been frightened at the presence of a stranger, and the light of fire and lamp; but that as the time went on they had grown bolder and were now disporting themselves as was their wont.

How busy they were! and hark to the strange noises! Up and down behind the old wainscot, over the ceiling and under the floor they raced, and gnawed, and scratched! Malcolmson smiled to himself as he recalled to mind the saying of Mrs. Dempster, "Bogies is rats, and rats is bogies!" The tea began to have its effect of intellectual and nervous stimulus; he saw with joy another long spell of work to be done before the night was past, and in the sense of security which it gave him, he allowed himself the luxury of a good look round the room. He took his lamp in one hand, and went all around, wondering that so quaint and beautiful an old house had been so long neglected. The carving of the oak on the panels of the wainscot was fine, and on and round the doors and windows it was beautiful and of rare merit. There were some old pictures on the walls, but they were coated so thick with dust and dirt that he could not distinguish any detail of them, though he held his lamp as high as he could over his head. Here and there as he went round he saw some crack or hole blocked for a moment by the face of a rat with its bright eyes glittering in the light, but in an instant it was gone, and a squeak and a scamper followed. The thing that most struck him, however, was the rope of the great alarm bell on the roof, which hung down in a corner of the room on the right-hand side of the fireplace.

He pulled up close to the hearth a great high-backed carved oak chair, and sat down to his last cup of tea. When this was done he made up the fire, and went back to his work, sitting at the corner of the table, having the fire to his left. For a little while the rats disturbed him somewhat with their perpetual scampering, but he got accustomed to the noise as one does to the ticking of a clock or to the roar of moving water; and he became so immersed in his work that everything in the world, except the problem which he was trying to solve, passed away from him.

He suddenly looked up; his problem

was still unsolved, and there was in the air that sense of the hour before the dawn, which is so dread to doubtful life. The noise of the rats had ceased. Indeed it seemed to him that it must have ceased but lately and that it was the sudden cessation which had disturbed him. The fire had fallen low, but still it threw out a deep red glow. As he looked he started in spite of his *sang-froid*.

There on the great high-backed carved oak chair by the right side of the fireplace sat an enormous rat, steadily glaring at him with baleful eyes. He made a motion as though to hunt it away, but it did not stir. Then he made the motion of throwing something. Still it did not stir, but showed its great white teeth angrily, and its cruel eyes shone in the lamplight with an added vindictiveness.

Malcolmson felt amazed, and seizing the poker from the hearth ran at it to kill it. Before, however, he could strike it, the rat, with a squeak that sounded like the concentration of hate, jumped upon the floor, and, running up the rope of the alarm bell, disappeared in the darkness beyond the range of the green-shaded lamp. Instantly, strange to say, the noisy scampering of the rats in the wainscot began again.

By this time Malcolmson's mind was quite off the problem; and as a shrill cock-crow outside told him of the approach of morning, he went to bed and to sleep.

He slept so sound that he was not even waked by Mrs. Dempster coming in to make up his room. It was only when she had tidied up the place and got his breakfast ready and tapped on the screen which closed in his bed that he woke. He was a little tired still after his night's hard work, but a strong cup of tea soon freshened him up and, taking his book, he went out for his morning walk, bringing with him a few sandwiches lest he should not care to return till dinner time. He found a quiet walk between high elms some way outside the town, and here he spent the greater part of the day studying his Laplace. On his return he looked in to see Mrs. Witham and to thank her for her kindness. When she saw him coming, through the diamond-paned bay window of her sanctum, she came out to meet him and asked him in. She looked at him searchingly and shook her head as she said:

"You must not overdo it, sir. You are paler this morning than you should be. Too late hours and too hard work on the brain isn't good for any man! But tell me, sir, how did you pass the night? Well, I hope? But, my heart! sir, I was glad when Mrs. Dempster told me this morning that you were all right and sleeping sound when she went in."

"Oh, I was all right," he answered smiling; "the 'somethings' didn't worry me, as yet. Only the rats; and they had a circus, I tell you, all over the place. There was one wicked-looking old devil that sat up on my own chair by the fire, and wouldn't go till I took the poker to him, and then he ran up the rope of the alarm bell and got to somewhere up the wall or the ceiling—I couldn't see where, it was so dark."

"Mercy on us," said Mrs. Witham, "an old devil, and sitting on a chair by the fireside! Take care, sir, take care! There's many a true word spoken in jest."

"How do you mean? 'Pon my word I don't understand."

"An old devil! *The* old devil, perhaps. There! sir, you needn't laugh," for Malcolmson had broken into a hearty peal. "You young folks think it easy to laugh at things that makes older ones shudder. Never mind, sir! never mind! Please God, you'll laugh all the time. It's what I wish

you myself!" and the good lady beamed all over in sympathy with his enjoyment, her fears gone for a moment.

"Oh, forgive me!" said Malcolmson presently. "Don't think me rude; but the idea was too much for me—that the old devil himself was on the chair last night!" And at the thought he laughed again. Then he went home to dinner.

THIS evening the scampering of the rats began earlier; indeed it had been going on before his arrival, and only ceased while his presence by its freshness disturbed them. After dinner he sat by the fire for a while and had a smoke; and then, having cleared his table, began to work as before. Tonight the rats disturbed him more than they had done on the previous night. How they scampered up and down and under and over! How they squeaked, and scratched, and gnawed! How they, getting bolder by degrees, came to the mouths of their holes and to the chinks and cracks and crannies in the wainscoting till their eyes shone like tiny lamps as the firelight rose and fell! But to him, now doubtless accustomed to them, their eyes were not wicked; only their playfulness touched him. Sometimes the boldest of them made sallies out on the floor or along the moldings of the wainscot. Now and again as they disturbed him Malcolmson made a sound to frighten them, smiting the table with his hand or giving a fierce "Hsh, hsh," so that they fled straightway to their holes.

And so the early part of the night wore on; and despite the noise Malcolmson got more and more immersed in his work.

All at once he stopped, as on the previous night, being overcome by a sudden sense of silence. There was not the faintest sound of gnaw, or scratch, or squeak. The silence was as of the grave. He remembered the odd occurrence of the previous night, and intuitively he looked at the chair standing close by the fireside. And then a very odd sensation thrilled through him.

There, on the great old high-backed carved oak chair beside the fireplace sat the same enormous rat, steadily glaring at him with baleful eyes.

Instinctively he took the nearest thing to his hand, a book of logarithms, and flung it at it. The book was badly aimed and the rat did not stir, so again the poker performance of the previous night was repeated; and again the rat, being closely pursued, fled up the rope of the alarm bell. Strangely, too, the departure of this rat was instantly followed by the renewal of the noise made by the general rat community. On this occasion, as on the previous one, Malcolmson could not see at what part of the room the rat disappeared, for the green shade of his lamp left the upper part of the room in darkness, and the fire had burned low.

On looking at his watch he found it was close on midnight; and, not sorry for the *divertissement,* he made up his fire and made himself his nightly pot of tea. He had got through a good spell of work, and thought himself entitled to a cigarette; and so he sat on the great carved oak chair before the fire and enjoyed it. While smoking, he began to think that he would like to know where the rat disappeared to, for he had certain ideas for the morrow not entirely unconnected with a rat-trap. Accordingly he lit another lamp and placed it so that it would shine well into the right-hand corner of the wall by the fireplace. Then he got all the books he had with him, and placed them handy to throw at the vermin. Finally he lifted the rope of the alarm bell and placed the end of it on the table, fixing the extreme end under the lamp. As he handled it he could not help noticing how pliable it was, especially for so

strong a rope, and one not in use. "You could hang a man with it," he thought to himself. When his preparations were made he looked around, and said complacently:

"There now, my friend, I think we shall learn something of you this time!" He began his work again, and though as before somewhat disturbed at first by the noise of the rats, soon lost himself in his propositions and problems.

Again he was called to his immediate surroundings suddenly. This time it might not have been the sudden silence only which took his attention; there was a slight movement of the rope, and the lamp moved. Without stirring, he looked to see if his pile of books was within range, and then cast his eye along the rope. As he looked he saw the great rat drop from the rope on the oak armchair and sit there glaring at him. He raised a book in his right hand, and taking careful aim, flung it at the rat. The latter, with a quick movement, sprang aside and dodged the missile. He then took another book, and a third, and flung them one after another at the rat, but each time unsuccessfully.

At last, as he stood with a book poised in his hand to throw, the rat squeaked and seemed afraid. This made Malcolmson more than ever eager to strike, and the book flew and struck the rat a resounding blow. It gave a terrified squeak, and turning on its pursuer a look of terrible malevolence, ran up the chair-back and made a great jump to the rope of the alarm bell and ran up it like lightning. The lamp rocked under the sudden strain.

Malcolmson kept his eyes on the rat, and saw it by the light of the second lamp leap to a molding of the wainscot and disappear through a hole in one of the great pictures which hung on the wall, obscured and invisible through its coating of dirt and dust.

"I shall look up my friend's habitation in the morning," said the student, as he went over to collect his books. "The third picture from the fireplace; I shall not forget."

He picked up the books one by one, commenting on them as he lifted them. "*Conic Sections* he does not mind, nor *Cycloidal Oscillations*, nor the *Principia*, nor *Quaternions*, nor *Thermodynamics*. Now for the book that fetched him!"

Malcolmson took it up and looked at it. As he did so he started, and a sudden pallor overspread his face. He looked round uneasily and shivered slightly, as he murmured to himself:

"The Bible my mother gave me! What an odd coincidence!"

He sat down to work again, and the rats in the wainscot renewed their gambols. They did not disturb him, however; somehow their presence gave him a sense of companionship. But he could not attend to his work, and after striving to master the subject on which he was engaged gave it up in despair, and went to bed as the first streak of dawn stole in through the eastern window.

He slept heavily but uneasily, and dreamed much; and when Mrs. Dempster woke him late in the morning he seemed ill at ease, and for a few minutes did not seem to realize exactly where he was. His first request rather surprized the servant.

"Mrs. Dempster, when I am out today I wish you would get the steps and dust or wash those pictures—especially that one the third from the fireplace—I want to see what they are."

LATE in the afternoon Malcolmson worked at his books in the shaded walk, and the cheerfulness of the previous day came back to him as the day wore on, and he found that his reading was progressing well. He had worked out to a satisfactory conclusion all the

problems which had as yet baffled him, and it was in a state of jubilation that he paid a visit to Mrs. Witham at "The Good Traveller." He found a stranger in the cozy sitting-room with the landlady, who was introduced to him as Doctor Thornhill. She was not quite at ease, and this, combined with the doctor's plunging at once into a series of questions, made Malcolmson come to the conclusion that his presence was not an accident; so without preliminary he said:

"Doctor Thornhill, I shall with pleasure answer you any question you may choose to ask me if you will answer me one question first."

The doctor seemed surprized, but he smiled and answered at once, "Done! What is it?"

"Did Mrs. Witham ask you to come here and see me and advise me?"

Doctor Thornhill for a moment was taken aback, and Mrs. Witham got fiery red and turned away; but the doctor was a frank and ready man, and he answered at once and openly:

"She did: but she didn't intend you to know it. I suppose it was my clumsy haste that made you suspect. She told me that she did not like the idea of your being in that house all by yourself, and that she thought you took too much strong tea. In fact, she wants me to advise you if possible to give up the tea and the very late hours. I was a keen student in my time, so I suppose I may take the liberty of a college man, and without offense, advise you not quite as a stranger."

Malcolmson with a bright smile held out his hand. "Shake! as they say in America," he said. "I must thank you for your kindness, and Mrs. Witham, too, and your kindness deserves a return on my part. I promise to take no more strong tea—no tea at all till you let me—and I shall go to bed tonight at one o'clock at latest. Will that do?"

"Capital," said the doctor. "Now tell us all that you noticed in the old house," and so Malcolmson told in minute detail all that had happened in the last two nights. He was interrupted every now and then by some exclamation from Mrs. Witham, till finally when he told of the episode of the Bible the landlady's pent-up emotions found vent in a shriek; and it was not till a stiff glass of brandy and water had been administered that she grew composed again. Doctor Thornhill listened with a face of growing gravity, and when the narrative was complete and Mrs. Witham had been restored he asked:

"The rat always went up the rope of the alarm bell?"

"Always."

"I suppose you know," said the doctor afer a pause, "what the rope is?"

"No!"

"It is," said the doctor slowly, "the very rope which the hangman used for all the victims of the Judge's judicial rancor!" Here he was interrupted by another scream from Mrs. Witham, and steps had to be taken for her recovery. Malcolmson having looked at his watch, and found that it was close to his dinner hour, had gone home before her complete recovery.

When Mrs. Witham was herself again she almost assailed the doctor with angry questions as to what he meant by putting such horrible ideas into the poor young man's mind. "He has quite enough there already to upset him," she added.

Doctor Thornhill replied:

"My dear madam, I had a distinct purpose in it! I wanted to draw his attention to the bell rope, and to fix it there. It may be that he is in a highly overwrought state, and has been studying too much, although I am bound to say that he seems as sound and healthy a young man, mentally and bodily, as ever I saw—but then the rats—and that suggestion of the devil." The doctor shook his head and

went on. "I would have offered to go and stay the first night with him but I felt sure it would have been a cause of offense. He may get in the night some strange fright or hallucination; and if he does I want him to pull that rope. All alone as he is it will give us warning, and we may reach him in time to be of service. I shall be sitting up pretty late tonight and shall keep my ears open. Do not be alarmed if Benchurch gets a surprize before morning."

"Oh, Doctor, what do you mean? What do you mean?"

"I mean this; that possibly—nay, more probably—we shall hear the great alarm bell from the Judge's House tonight," and the doctor made about as effective an exit as could be thought of.

When Malcolmson arrived home he found that it was a little after his usual time, and Mrs. Dempster had gone away—the rules of Greenhow's Charity were not to be neglected. He was glad to see that the place was bright and tidy with a cheerful fire and a well-trimmed lamp. The evening was colder than might have been expected in April, and a heavy wind was blowing with such rapidly increasing strength that there was every promise of a storm during the night. For a few minutes after his entrance the noise of the rats ceased; but so soon as they became accustomed to his presence they began again. He was glad to hear them, for he felt once more the feeling of companionship in their noise, and his mind ran back to the strange fact that they only ceased to manifest themselves when that other—the great rat with the baleful eyes—came upon the scene. The reading-lamp only was lit and its green shade kept the ceiling and the upper part of the room in darkness; so that the cheerful light from the hearth spreading over the floor and shining on the white cloth laid over the end of the table was warm and cheery.

Malcolmson sat down to his dinner with a good appetite and a buoyant spirit. After his dinner and a cigarette he sat steadily down to work, determined not to let anything disturb him, for he remembered his promise to the doctor, and made up his mind to make the best of the time at his disposal.

For an hour or so he worked all right, and then his thoughts began to wander from his books. The actual circumstances around him, the calls on his physical attention, and his nervous susceptibility were not to be denied. By this time the wind had become a gale, and the gale a storm. The old house, solid though it was, seemed to shake to its foundations, and the storm roared and raged through its many chimneys and its queer old gables, producing strange, unearthly sounds in the empty rooms and corridors. Even the great alarm bell on the roof must have felt the force of the wind, for the rope rose and fell slightly, as though the bell were moved a little from time to time, and the limber rope fell on the oak floor with a hard and hollow sound.

As Malcolmson listened to it he bethought himself of the doctor's words, "It is the rope which the hangman used for the victims of the Judge's judicial rancor," and he went over to the corner of the fireplace and took it in his hand to look at it. There seemed a sort of deadly interest in it, and as he stood there he lost himself for a moment in speculation as to who these victims were, and the grim wish of the Judge to have such a ghastly relic ever under his eyes. As he stood there the swaying of the bell on the roof still lifted the rope now and again; but presently there came a new sensation—a sort of tremor in the rope, as though something was moving along it.

Looking up instinctively, Malcolmson saw the great rat coming slowly down toward him, glaring at him steadily. He dropped the rope and started back with a muttered curse, and the rat, turning, ran up the rope again and disappeared, and at the same instant Malcolmson became conscious that the noise of the rats, which had ceased for a while, began again.

All this set him thinking, and it occurred to him that he had not investigated the lair of the rat or looked at the pictures, as he had intended. He lit the other lamp without the shade, and, holding it up, went and stood opposite the third picture from the fireplace on the right-hand side where he had seen the rat disappear on the previous night.

At the first glance he started back so suddenly that he almost dropped the lamp, and a deadly pallor overspread his face. His knees shook, and heavy drops of sweat came on his forehead, and he trembled. But he was young and plucky, and pulled himself together, and after the pause of a few seconds stepped forward again, raised the lamp, and examined the picture which had been dusted and washed, and now stood out clearly.

It was of a judge dressed in his robes of scarlet and ermine. His face was strong and merciless, evil, crafty, and vindictive, with a sensual mouth, hooked nose of ruddy color, and shaped like the beak of a bird of prey. The rest of the face was of a cadaverous color. The eyes were of peculiar brilliance and with a terribly malignant expression. As he looked at them, Malcolmson grew cold, for he saw there the very counterpart of the eyes of the great rat. The lamp almost fell from his hand, he saw the rat with its baleful eyes peering out through the hole in the corner of the picture, and noted the sudden cessation of the noise of the other rats. However, he pulled himself together, and went on with his examination of the picture.

The Judge was seated in a great high-backed carved oak chair, on the right-hand side of a great stone fireplace where, in the corner, a rope hung down from the ceiling, its end lying coiled on the floor. With a feeling of something like horror, Malcolmson recognized the scene of the room as it stood, and gazed around him in an awestruck manner as though he expected to find some strange presence behind him. Then he looked over to the corner of the fireplace,—and with a loud cry he let the lamp fall from his hand.

There, in the Judge's armchair, with a rope hanging behind, sat the rat with the Judge's baleful eyes, now intensified and with a fiendish leer. Save for the howling of the storm without there was silence.

The fallen lamp recalled Malcolmson to himself. Fortunately it was of metal, and so the oil was not spilt. However, the practical need of attending to it settled at once his nervous apprehensions. When he had turned it out, he wiped his brow and thought for a moment.

"This will not do," he said to himself. "If I go on like this I shall become a crazy fool. This must stop! I promised the doctor I would not take tea. Faith, he was pretty right! My nerves must have been getting into a queer state. Funny I did not notice it. I never felt better in my life. However, it is all right now, and I shall not be such a fool again."

Then he mixed himself a good stiff glass of brandy and water and resolutely sat down to his work.

NEARLY an hour later he looked up from his book, disturbed by the sudden stillness. Without, the wind howled and roared louder than ever, and the rain drove in sheets against the windows, beating like hail on the glass; but within there was no sound whatever save

the echo of the wind as it roared in the great chimney, and now and then a hiss as a few raindrops found their way down the chimney in a lull of the storm. The fire had fallen low and had ceased to flame, though it threw out a red glow. Malcolmson listened attentively, and presently heard a thin, squeaking noise, very faint. It came from the corner of the room where the rope hung down, and he thought it was the creaking of the rope on the floor as the swaying of the bell raised and lowered it. Looking up, however, he saw in the dim light the great rat clinging to the rope and gnawing it. The rope was already nearly gnawed through—he could see the lighter color where the strands were laid bare. As he looked, the job was completed, and the severed end of the rope fell clattering on the oaken floor, while for an instant the great rat remained like a knob or tassel at the end of the rope, which now began to sway to and fro.

Malcolmson felt for a moment another pang of terror as he thought that now the possibility of calling the outer world to his assistance was cut off, but an intense anger took its place, and seizing the book he was reading he hurled it at the rat. The blow was well aimed, but before the missile could reach him the rat dropped off and struck the floor with a soft thud. Malcolmson instantly rushed over toward it, but it darted away and disappeared in the darkness of the shadows of the room.

Malcolmson felt that his work was over for the night, and determined then and there to vary the monotony of the proceedings by a hunt for the rat, and took off the green shade of the lamp so as to insure wider-spreading light. As he did so the gloom of the upper part of the room was relieved, and in the new flood of light, great by comparison with the previous darkness, the pictures on the wall stood out boldly. From where he stood, Malcolmson saw right opposite to him the third picture on the wall from the right of the fireplace. He rubbed his eyes in surprize, and then a great fear began to come upon him.

In the center of the picture was a great irregular patch of brown canvas, as fresh as when it was stretched on the frame. The background was as before, with chair and chimney-corner and rope, but the figure of the Judge had disappeared.

Malcolmson, almost in a chill of horror, turned slowly round, and then he began to shake and tremble like a man in a palsy. His strength seemed to have left him, and he was incapable of action or movement, hardly even of thought. He could only see and hear.

There, on the great high-backed carved oak chair sat the Judge in his robes of scarlet and ermine, with his baleful eyes glaring vindictively, and a smile of triumph on the resolute, cruel mouth, as he lifted with his hands a *black cap*. Malcolmson felt as if the blood were running from his heart, as one does in moments of prolonged suspense. There was a singing in his ears. Without, he could hear the roar and howl of the tempest, and through it, swept on the storm, came the striking of midnight by the great chimes in the market place. He stood for a space of time that seemed to him endless still as a statue, and with wide-open, horror-struck eyes, breathless. As the clock struck, so the smile of triumph on the Judge's face intensified, and at the last stroke of midnight he placed the black cap on his head.

SLOWLY and deliberately the Judge rose from his chair and picked up the piece of the rope of the alarm bell which lay on the floor, drew it through his hands as if he enjoyed its touch, and then deliberately began to knot one end of it,

fashioning it into a noose. This he tightened and tested with his foot, pulling hard at it till he was satisfied and then making a running noose of it, which he held in his hand. Then he began to move along the table on the opposite side to Malcolmson, keeping his eyes on him until he had passed him, when with a quick movement he stood in front of the door. Malcolmson then began to feel that he was trapped, and tried to think of what he should do. There was some fascination in the Judge's eyes, which he never took off him, and he had, perforce, to look. He saw the Judge approach—still keeping between him and the door—and raise the noose and throw it toward him as if to entangle him. With a great effort he made a quick movement to one side, and saw the rope fall beside him, and heard it strike the oaken floor. Again the Judge raised the noose and tried to ensnare him, ever keeping his baleful eyes fixed on him, and each time by a mighty effort the student just managed to evade it. So this went on for many times, the Judge seeming never discouraged nor discomposed at failure, but playing as a cat does with a mouse.

At last in despair, which had reached its climax, Malcolmson cast a quick glance round him. The lamp seemed to have blazed up, and there was a fairly good light in the room. At the many rat-holes and in the chinks and crannies of the wainscot he saw the rats' eyes; and this aspect, that was purely physical, gave him a gleam of comfort. He looked around and saw that the rope of the great alarm bell was laden with rats. Every inch of it was covered with them, and more and more were pouring through the small circular hole in the ceiling whence it emerged, so that with their weight the bell was beginning to sway.

Hark! It had swayed till the clapper had touched the bell. The sound was but a tiny one, but the bell was only beginning to sway, and it would increase.

At the sound the Judge, who had been keeping his eyes fixed on Malcolmson, looked up, and a scowl of diabolical anger overspread his face. His eyes fairly glowed like hot coals, and he stamped his foot with a sound that seemed to make the house shake. A dreadful peal of thunder broke overhead as he raised the rope again, while the rats kept running up and down the rope as though working against time. This time, instead of throwing it, he drew close to his victim, and held open the noose as he approached. As he came closer there seemed something paralyzing in his very presence, and Malcolmson stood rigid as a corpse. He felt the Judge's icy fingers touch his throat as he adjusted the rope. The noose tightened—tightened. Then the Judge, taking the rigid form of the student in his arms, carried him over and placed him standing in the oak chair, and stepping up beside him, put his hand up and caught the end of the swaying rope of the alarm bell. As he raised his hand the rats fled squeaking, and disappeared through the hole in the ceiling. Taking the end of the noose which was round Malcolmson's neck, he tied it to the hanging bell-rope, and then descending pulled away the chair.

* * * * *

When the alarm bell of the Judge's House began to sound, a crowd soon assembled. Lights and torches of various kinds appeared, and soon a silent crowd was hurrying to the spot. They knocked loudly at the door, but there was no reply. Then they burst in the door, and poured into the great dining-room, the doctor at the head.

There at the end of the rope of the great alarm bell hung the body of the student, and on the face of the Judge in the picture was a malignant smile.

BRILLIANT new star flames out in sky—nova in constellation Hercules believed result of collision between suns. . . . Earth losing its air—scientist discovers that our atmosphere is slowly leaking away into space. . . . Cooling sun to end all life in solar system—astronomers try to estimate how long our sun can last. . . . Farmers war against insect hordes that threaten destruction of crops. . . . What a field for the imagination of writers these suggestions offer! Is mankind doomed to annihilation before the increasing legions of insect life? Is our race to be slowly suffocated by the constant depletion of its life-giving air? Are we to perish slowly of cold as our sun dies? Or are we to evolve into super-beings, whose golden age will be as far above the present imperfect state of man as we are above the reptiles, only to have the brilliant achievements of the future smashed into ruin by a cosmic cataclysm, with mankind becoming just another noble experiment ending in failure? It is such cosmic themes as these that make weird-scientific stories the brilliant *tours de force* of imagination that they are, compared to which most other literature becomes flat and stale. Such imaginative fantasies, appearing from time to time in WEIRD TALES, have helped to make the high reputation of this magazine. This type of imaginative fiction can be truly classed as weird, and we will use such stories in the future, as in the past.

A Cup of Sparkling Joy

Ed. Camille, of Erie, Pennsylvania, writes: "Old, doddering 1934 brought, at least, one happiness to me, and that cup of sparkling joy is WEIRD TALES. I have been a reader of science-fiction for four years, and lately I have tired of it because of its selfsame plots and monotonous yarns. Then lo and behold! I encountered WT and in it I found what I have been searching the science-fiction magazines for all those futile four years in vain. You say you want to know what sort of stories your readers prefer; well, for my part give me stories of ancient civilizations (such as the Conan stories); ultra-cosmic dimensions (*Through the Gates of the Silver Key*); weird mystery (*The Trail of the Cloven Hoof*); weird-interplanetary (*Vampires of the Moon*); and anything that C. L. Moore writes. . . . Occasionally I enjoy a horror yarn or a story of dark magic. Such stories that I have read and liked are *Revelations in Black* by Carl Jacobi; *The Master of Souls* by Harold Ward. It seems to me that a horror yarn has to be written by a master to be good; so I suggest that you print horror and vampire yarns only when they are written by one who thoroughly understands them—H. P. Lovecraft for instance—he has written such horror yarns that were perfect gems."

The Trail of the Cloven Hoof

Carroll Wales, of Denmark, Maine, writes: "Each succeeding issue of your grand magazine seems better than the one before it. This summer I have been in the hospital, and it was there that I read your August issue. It sure helped to pass the time away and provide hours of great enjoyment. *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof* is one of the best serials you have ever published. Keep up the good work."

Best Stories of 1934

Donald V. Allgeier, of Mountain Grove, Missouri, writes: "Why not ask your readers to let you know what stories they liked best

(Please turn to page 394)

Coming Next Month

ON A certain evening, Nushain the astrologer pored over his horoscope, which he had drawn with sundry-colored inks on a sheet of papyrus. He was much startled when, on the blank lower margin of the sheet, he saw a curious character which was no part of his own scribbling. The character was a hieroglyph written in dark bituminous brown, and seeming to represent a mummy whose shroudings were loosened about the legs and whose feet were set in the posture of a long stride. It was facing toward that quarter of the chart where stood the sign indicating the Great Dog, which, in Zothique, was a house of the zodiac.

Nushain's surprize turned to a sort of trepidation as he studied the hieroglyph. He knew that the margin of the chart had been wholly clear on the previous night; and during the past day he had not left the attic at any time. Mouzda, his servant, would never have dared to touch the chart; and, moreover, the negro was little skilled in writing. Among the various inks employed by Nushain, there was none that resembled the sullen brown of the character, which seemed to stand out in a sad relief on the white papyrus.

Nushain felt the alarm of one who confronts a sinister and unexplainable apparition. No human hand, surely, had inscribed the mummy-shapen character, like the sign of a strange outer planet about to invade the houses of his horoscope. Vainly, for many hours, he sought to unriddle the mystery: but in all his books there was naught to enlighten him; for this thing, it seemed, was wholly without precedent in astrology. . . .

This intense story, written in Clark Ashton Smith's most fascinating style, is one of the strangest stories ever told, a tale of inexorable destiny, and a grim figure that strode like the approach of doom through the houses of the astrologer's horoscope. This story will be printed complete in the April WEIRD TALES:

THE LAST HIEROGLYPH

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

—ALSO—

THE MAN WHO WAS TWO MEN
By ARTHUR WILLIAM BERNAL

An amazing weird-scientific story that will hold your intense interest—probably the most entertaining story about radio ever written.

THE HAND OF THE O'MECCA
By HOWARD WANDREI

A strange, uncanny story about the weird figures that beset Elof Bocak one night in the fog, and the courting of a witch-woman.

OUT OF THE EONS
By HAZEL HEALD

A tale of Elder Magic and a monstrous idol—a shuddery tale of primordial evil.

SHADOWS OF BLOOD
By EANDO BINDER

A grim story of torture in the cruel days of the Roman Emperor Caligula.

April Weird Tales . . . . Out April 1

The Eyrie

(Continued from page 392)

during 1934? I believe the answers would be quite interesting. I am giving my classification of the best stories of the year: best novel—*The Trail of the Cloven Hoof;* best novelette—*Black Thirst;* best short story—*The Satanic Piano;* best ultra-short story—*The Marvelous Knife;* best reprint—*The Dead Man's Tale.* In case you are interested in second choices, I may as well admit that it was very hard to decide in every case. The second-best novel was *The Solitary Hunters,* closely followed by *The People of the Black Circle.* The runners-up in novelettes were *The Golden Glow* and *A Witch Shall Be Born. The Sapphire Goddess, Scarlet Dream* and *The Isle of Dark Magic* stand out just a trifle below. As to short stories, *Old Sledge* is second and *Naked Lady* third. In the very short group, *The Three Marked Pennies* is right behind *The Marvelous Knife;* and *The Parasitic Hand* is the other outstanding reprint."

Uniformly Good Stories

John R. Small, of Washington, D. C., writes: "Allow me to wish you a happy and prosperous New Year in return for all the many happy hours I have spent enjoying WEIRD TALES, a great medium for an hour or so's escape from monotonous reality every month. 1934 was a year during which, it seems to me, your stories were uniformly good. C. L. Moore's work has been outstanding. But every once in a while a real gem pops up. In my humble opinion, two outstanding masterpieces were printed during 1934. They were the poem, *Sic Transit Gloria* by Brooke Byrne, and that remarkable but apparently little appreciated tale, *The Three Marked Pennies* by Mary E. Counselman. *The Three Marked Pennies* was one in a million. I honestly consider it one of the best short stories I have ever read. It was so different from anything which has appeared in recent years that it fairly took my imagination for a delightful journey to that small town. I have read the story seven times since it came out." [We have received more favorable comment on Miss Counselman's little story than any previous story as short as this one has received. Though this was only a "filler" story in length, it made a ten-strike with our readers.—THE EDITOR.]

Jornado's Fate in "Black Bagheela"

A reader from Baltimore, who signs herself "a lover of Conan the Cimmerian," writes to the Eyrie: "I am a reader of WEIRD TALES and so is my daughter. We certainly like every story in the magazine. It seems a pity to me to let Jornado stay in the shape of an ape. I wonder if the writer of these good stories couldn't give Jornado back his real shape and make everybody happy. Of all stories in WT I like the Conan stories best. He is what I call a man the bravest and the best. Please have more stories about Conan. WEIRD TALES is lost without them."

A Champion Team

Eugene Benefiel, of Los Angeles, writes: "Football season having ended, and the nation having been deluged by All-American teams, the urge became too strong for me to resist. Have an All-Time All-WT team! My selections are as follows: right end—Hul Jok of Venhez (*When the Green Star Waned* by Dyalhis). A fast-moving fellow for such a big man. Could and did handle tough opposition. Right tackle—Northwest Smith (*Shambleau, Black Thirst,* etc. by Moore). Powerful and aggressive in all games. Willing to tackle anything. Right guard—Yarol of Venus (*Shambleau, Scarlet Dream,* etc. by Moore). A perfect guard. Covers Smith's opponent as well as his own, and does it well, too. Center—Price Durand (*Golden Blood* by Williamson). No equal while he played. Held the center of attraction with little effort. Left guard—Jules de Grandin (Seabury Quinn). Another perfect guard. A defensive wizard and powerful on offense. Plays at top form every time. Left tackle—Robert Grandon of Terra (*Buccaneers of Venus* by Kline). Like Smith, willing to tackle anything. One of the most aggressive players on the squad. Left end—Jirel of Joiry (*The Black God's Kiss* and *Black God's Shadow* by Moore). Here is an end who can cover ground! A wildcat on defense and afraid of no opponent. Quarterback and captain—Solomon Kane (Robert E. Howard). A smart field general and

an offensive terror. Right halfback—Lilith of Lilin (*Queen of the Lilin* by Price). Without doubt the most elusive back of the decade. Caught only once. Left halfback—Ralibar Vooz (*The Seven Geases* by Smith). They are still talking about his long marches. A tireless and willing back. Fullback—Conan of Cimmeria (Robert E. Howard). Could always be depended upon to provide the scoring punch. Rated the most powerful player in WT history. Well, there they are! Wonder what changes ye editor and readers would make in the above line-up."

WT at Midnight

J. Walter Briggs, of Rhinebeck, New York, writes: "As a reader of WEIRD TALES I take pleasure in stating that I have not missed a half-dozen copies since the first issue. During all this time I have never written to the Eyrie, for I have had no fault to find with the stories, make-up, or covers. If I had been displeased with WEIRD TALES I could easily have refrained from buying it. Naturally one has preferences; otherwise one would be a nitwit, and I don't think nitwits read your magazine. I like my stories weird, not horrible and nasty as some magazines seem to think a weird story must be. Your covers are superlative; nude or otherwise they are not surpassed by any other publication. I do not care for reprints, as I have read about all the stories you have published before, and some of the old masterpieces are not worth reading at all, compared with the work your authors of today can turn out. I enjoy Conan, Northwest Smith and Jules de Grandin above all other heroes that live within your pages. I am glad *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof* is finished, as that was the poorest yarn ever wished on your readers. Please don't do it again. Did you read the ms. before buying it? or flip a coin, perhaps? The best story in the January issue was *Hands of the Dead* by Quinn. *The Dark Eidolon* by Smith comes next, beautifully conceived and written, although perhaps a bit too verbose. As I have remarked, I like 'em weird. I have just finished my January copy. It is 12:25 a. m., ten below zero, and outside a dog is howling. Frost is doing things to the house, rats are sharpening their teeth on the plaster inside the walls, but somehow I can't shiver. Tell the boys to speed 'em up. Wish I were able to make all the weird plots that enter

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my mind 'jell'. I should like to send in a yarn that would send your staff of readers to the crazy-house. They must be a case-hardened lot; otherwise they would have departed to that haven long ago. Best wishes for a weirder WEIRD TALES."

A New Weird Tales Fan

A reader from Oak Park, Illinois, who asks that we use only his initials, E. W. E., writes to the Eyrie: "I am writing this note, the first fan letter I ever attempted, in form of an apology, criticism, etc. But first I want to assure you that you have added me to the list of steady readers. Although I have been a constant 'magazine fiend' for several years, I had never even bothered to look at WEIRD TALES, as I thought it was 'just another magazine'. That was up until your January 1935 issue came out. But now—well, it's WEIRD TALES first, last and always. . . . Just a word about your new and young author who wrote *The Feast in the Abbey*, Robert Bloch. I am waiting with great anticipation for more of his stories, for he is a very promising writer. Keep your eyes on him. You'll hear from him in the near future—and he won't be second best, either."

Bloch's Attacks on Howard

Kirk Mashburn writes from Houston, Texas: "A word about Robert Bloch's attacks on Howard's Conan stories: A reader who buys the magazine for entertainment, and has no personal stake at issue, has every right to offer whatever adverse criticism he thinks justified by what he considers the failure of any writer to come up to expectations. But for one writer, while seeking to establish his own footing, to attack another to the editor—that smacks to me of questionable ethics. Polecat ethics is what I mean; but I hope you print the above paragraph in the Eyrie—there are other offenders besides Brother Bloch—and I know you won't, if I use the words I want to. Please take note that I comment upon Mr. Bloch's ethics, and not upon his story in the January issue."

New Ideas in Science-Fiction

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "The January WEIRD TALES was even better than last month's, and that is saying a good deal. Continue the new year as you have begun and you'll get mighty few kicks from me. Bassett Morgan again takes first honors with his *Black Bagheela*, and I sincerely hope that he will soon see fit to bring back Jornado, Daunt, Bibi-ti and Ti-Fong in another sequel. Second place goes to *Rulers of the Future* by Paul Ernst, who brings forth some truly remarkable new ideas in science-fiction, while third seems to be about equally divided between Laurence J. Cahill's *Charon* and Terrill's *The Supreme Witch*, which, since it was first printed eight years ago, stands alone as a perfect example of that type of story. Incidentally, after reading *The Feast in the Abbey* by Robert Bloch, I must confess that I missed Robert E. Howard and Conan, despite Mr. Bloch's slanderous assertions regarding both. Nevertheless, I believe Mr. Bloch shows promise along weird lines, and would like to see more of his work, though I fear he will never be another Howard."

Without a Gas-Mask

H. A. Harris, of Santa Rosa, California, writes to the Eyrie: "Your magazine gave me quite a surprize when I started to read it for the first time yesterday, as I thought it was probably filled with piffle. I bought it for the artist's conception of an Indian maiden (probably Lupe Velez) posing with black leopards on the cover, fully expecting to tear off the picture and throw the rest of the magazine into the fire. But I found I could read the stories without a gas-mask and that they were quite as plausible and more inspiring than the usual scientific thrillers. I was most interested in the short story, *The Feast in the Abbey*."

In Praise of Quinn

Michael Liene, of Hazleton, Pennsylvania, pans most of the stories in our January issue, but has this to say about Quinn: "Seabury Quinn's *Hands of the Dead* gets my vote for the best story in the January issue. It is well told, as usual. Those long flowing sentences, so well written, the splendid choice of words, with no pretense of eye-shattering adjectives and tongue-twisting words such as Clark Ashton Smith attempts. Mr. Quinn is WEIRD TALES' greatest story-teller even though there are many faults to find with his writings, too. Two paragraphs in the story, one describing the heroine's playing of the *Londonderry Air* on the piano; and the second, telling how she is arrayed in night attire, are almost the exact descriptions

used in one of Mr. Quinn's earlier stories, entitled *The Chapel of Mystic Horror*. And, too, Mr. Quinn often uses the same description for his heroines—and the descriptions of beautiful rooms. However, his descriptions are so beautiful that it is a pleasure to reread them. . . . The idea in *Hands of the Dead* is rather far-fetched, but the story is very interesting, beautifully written—and it has de Grandin braving dangers as usual. What more can one want? . . . Robert Bloch's *The Feast in the Abbey* is a fine short story. It gets my second choice. Robert E. Howard's fans will criticize Mr. Bloch's story, to get even with him for doing the same with Mr. Howard's stories. But this is unfair. I am a Robert E. Howard fan, but can not say anything against Mr. Bloch's fine story. Indeed, I think it one of the finest that WEIRD TALES has ever published. When shall we see more of Mr. Bloch's works?" [We are glad to say that you are wrong about Mr. Howard's fans cracking down on Mr. Bloch's little story. On the contrary, many of the letters received give unstinted praise to *The Feast in the Abbey*, short though that story is; and as this issue goes to press, there have been only two adverse votes. We will shortly publish another brief tale by Mr. Bloch, entitled *The Secret in the Tomb*.—THE EDITOR.]

Better and Better

Mrs. A. G. Edwards, of Wewoka, Oklahoma, writes: "I have just finished WEIRD TALES for January, and I think the stories are getting better and better. I can't decide which story I like best, for I liked them all so well. I have eagerly awaited each issue of WEIRD TALES ever since *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof* started. It was breathlessly interesting to the last chapter and last vivid word. The new serial, *Rulers of the Future* by Paul Ernst, promises to be a good story, and I can hardly wait for February's issue of WEIRD TALES. *Hands of the Dead* was another of Seabury Quinn's masterpieces. I surely like that fellow. His stories have given me many pleasant evenings."

Conan and Jirel and Smith

Fritz Stough, of York, Pennsylvania, writes: "I am by no means a letter writer, but I'll endeavor to write what I mean to say. I have been reading WEIRD TALES magazine since 1925 and I think I can truth-

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fully say that here of late you are printing better and better stories. I think that Conan and Jirel and Northwest Smith are the most interesting characters that could be put into a story. Would it be too much to ask for copies of the poems from which some of these stories are taken, such as *The Song of Xeethra,* found on page 93 of the January issue? If you can not send them, I would like to have information as to how to get them." [*The Song of Xeethra,* which appeared at the beginning of Clark Ashton Smith's story, *The Dark Eidolon,* was written by Mr. Smith himself. The poetry that Robert E. Howard so often uses to introduce his chapters is also written by the author himself, except when due credit is given to the poet from whose works they are taken. —THE EDITOR.]

Precious Space Wasted

Joseph Robinsky, of Elizabeth, New Jersey, writes to the Eyrie: "I can see no sense in WEIRD TALES using stories from back issues for the reprint section. In doing so, the magazine is only repeating itself and a lot of precious space is wasted. I highly approve of, and recommend your printing of the odd weird stories, foreign, obscure, and otherwise little known in the reprint section as in the past. Use only stories that have not appeared in the magazine. Let readers retain their copies if they feel they would like to reread a story in the future. . . . I know of no other magazine that features 'repeat' stories."

The January Issue

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "The January issue is one of the best all-around numbers in a long time. There is a good variety of stories and each one is superb. It is a hard task to pick the best story in this issue, so I will just have to resort to using details. *Rulers of the Future* by Ernst has a very exciting beginning. *Charon* by Cahill is a story with an idea that heretofore, to my knowledge, has not been used. *Hands of the Dead* by Quinn brings us Jules de Grandin in a good hypnotic story. *Black Bagheela* by Morgan is exciting all the way and needs a sequel in which the cruel acts of Ti-Fong will be brought to an end. I am glad to read the conclusion to *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof* by Arlton Eadie. It is an excellent ending and the serial is good, but I do not think that serials in a monthly magazine should have more than four parts. Clark Ashton Smith is at his best describing horrors in *The Dark Eidolon.* That magician certainly had some of the weirdest servants this author has yet described. Robert Bloch makes his bow to WT readers with an excellent tale,

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE MARCH WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
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(2) _____	_____
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despite all the discussion about him in the Eyrie. The other three tales are all splendid, and so I am sure that everybody has enjoyed reading this issue. So after carefully considering each story, I have decided that the three best in the January number are as follows: *The Dark Eidolon, Black Bagheela,* and *Hands of the Dead.*"

The Music of Erich Zann

Robert Nelson, of St. Charles, Illinois, writes: "I was deeply disappointed to see no note of comment whatsoever on H. P. Lovecraft's *The Music of Erich Zann,* which appeared in the reprint section for last November. This is one of the finest of eery short stories ever written, and is included in at least one of our leading anthologies. Few know and can realize the terror and anguish and sadness and unnamable visions which the powers of music can evoke. All of this is ably suggested in *The Music of Erich Zann.* And rereading this tale, the suggestions grow and mount on one, with the result that the entire aspect becomes something of a very serious nature. *The Dark Eidolon* by Clark Ashton Smith seems to me even to surpass his *The Colossus of Ylourgne*—a magnificent living piece of work."

Comments From California

Fred Anger, of Berkeley, California, writes: "Three cheers for Laurence J. Cahill's swell little story, *Charon.* It's this type of thing that makes me keep on buying WT. Give Cahill my vote for first place. *Hands of the Dead* was truly a Quinn masterpiece. It should by all rights have second vote. *Rulers of the Future* by Paul Ernst starts with a thrilling account of the voyage into the future and I feel that it is going to keep up the pace. In closing, I think I'll comment a bit on Robert Bloch's *The Feast in the Abbey.* May I remark that Mr. Bloch's attempt at showing off his ability with big words failed miserably in my estimation? All that this story convinced me of was the fact that Mr. Bloch reads the dictionary. I enjoyed seeing *The Supreme Witch* in your reprint section; it was well worth reading over again."

Robert Bloch's Story

Mrs. L. E. Goodman, of Chicago, writes: "My son Robert, who is sixteen years old,

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has been reading your magazine, WEIRD TALES. Naturally I am interested in the literature he is reading, and so I glanced through the magazine and have become very much interested in it myself. I enjoyed reading the story, *The Dark Eidolon* by Clark Ashton Smith, and was particularly impressed by the one written by Robert Bloch, *The Feast in the Abbey.* Could you tell me if Bloch has written any other stories, as my son would like to read them?" [Another story by Mr. Bloch, entitled *The Secret in the Tomb,* will appear in WEIRD TALES soon.—THE EDITOR.]

Pithy Comments

Edith M. Olsen, of Chicago, writes: I have just finished reading the January WEIRD TALES, and must let you know how much I enjoyed it. I thought *The Dark Eidolon* and *The Feast in the Abbey* were outstanding. Here's hoping that 1935 will bring us many more stories as fine as these."

Alice Hilton, of Chicago, writes: "I noticed a name new to me in the January issue of your magazine—Robert Bloch. His tale, *The Feast in the Abbey,* was interesting and I hope we will have more of his stories."

W. C. Flack, of Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, writes: "I have enjoyed WEIRD TALES for many years, because of the varied and unusual type of fiction it presents—fiction pleasingly different from that found in any other magazine."

Alvin Earl Perry, of Rockdale, Texas, writes: "*The Trail of the Cloven Hoof* ended well, as did Ernst's tale begin. I've noticed you never fail on good serials—keep up their high class."

Your Favorite Stories

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Write a letter, or fill out the coupon on page 398, and send it to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES. In the January issue, the voting was so close that four stories are in a neck and neck race for first place as this issue goes to press. They are *Hands of the Dead* by Seabury Quinn, *Charon* by Laurence J. Cahill, *The Dark Eidolon* by Clark Ashton Smith, and *The Feast in the Abbey* by Robert Bloch.

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established early in 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

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----	----	Feb.-Mar.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
Mar.	Mar.		----	Mar.	Mar.	----
----	----	Apr.-May	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	----
----	----		----	May	May	----
----	June	June-July	June	June	June	----
July	----		July	July	July	----
Aug.	----	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	----
----	----	----	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	----
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"Second: All war vessels shall be assembled—those of the Atlantic fleets midway between New York and Gibraltar, those of the Pacific fleets midway between San Francisco and Honolulu—and sunk.

"Third: One-half of all the monetary gold supply of the world shall be collected and turned over to my agents at places to be announced later.

"Fourth: At noon on the third day after the foregoing demands have been complied with, all existing governments shall resign and surrender their powers to my agents, who will be on hand to receive them.

"In my next communication I will fix the date for the fulfillment of these demands.

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